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Hide-and-go-seek: The Game of Literary Interpretation in *Éléazar ou la source et le buisson* by Michel Tournier

by

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the reading process in *Éléazar ou la source et le buisson* by Michel Tournier primarily using the metaphor of hide-and-go-seek. This children's game provides an entrance into the ludic and postmodern aspects of Tournier's narrative. The overarching metaphor of hide-and-go-seek organizes the thesis by following the different stages of game play, and in the process reveals the complex relationship among author, reader, and text.

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for Caleb and Rylee
who love to play
hide-and-go-seek

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List of Symbols

1 Chron, 1 Chronicles, The Holy Bible

1 Sam, 1 Samuel, The Holy Bible

Deut, Deuteronomy, The Holy Bible

ESB, Éléazar ou la source et le buisson

Exo, Exodus, The Holy Bible

Gen, Genesis, The Holy Bible

GMB, Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar

Hos, Hosea, The Holy Bible

John, Gospel of John, The Holy Bible

MA, Le Médianoche amoureux

Mark, Gospel of Mark, The Holy Bible

Matt, Gospel of Matthew, The Holy Bible

Num, The book of Numbers, The Holy Bible

Rev, The Revelation, The Holy Bible

Vendredi, Vendredi, ou, la vie sauvage

VP, Le Vent Paraclet

Introduction

Michel Tournier is one of the most popular of contemporary French novelists and has been a member of the Académie Goncourt since 1972. He publishes an average of 300,000 paperback editions of his work annually and over the past thirty years has sold over seven million copies of his novels (Brusnel, *Michel Tournier*). Despite his popularity among the general reading public, however, his relatively recent work *Éléazar ou la source et la buisson* (1996), has to date received little critical attention.

Tournier challenges readers of all ages and abilities to a game of interpretation through his novella *Éléazar*. Readers are presented with a concise text that on the surface seems simple and lucid; however, upon closer examination, the text turns out to be profound and stylistically complex. The narrative weaves together several storylines. *Éléazar* is a western depicting the migration from Ireland to the New Continent of America, a land filled with bandits, serpents, and deserts. It also traces the Biblical story of Moses and the Hebrew Exodus through which the protagonist Éléazar patterns and orders his life. Finally, the narrative engages an elemental and metaphysical dimension through the polarization of water and fire –the *source* and the *buisson.* The interweaving storylines, the myriad intertextual references, and the ludic utilization of literary devices like irony and inversion, combine to create a unique reading experience.

How then does the reader experience Tournier's writing? This is the burning question this thesis seeks to explore. We will use the metaphor of the game of hide-and-go-seek to explore the reading process in *Éléazar.*

Hide-and-go-seek

Hide-and-go-seek is one of the most basic childhood games. As in all games there are boundaries and rules that must be established to give structure to the play and to create a level playing field. But beyond the rules of the game, hide-and-go-seek is also governed by the hider's and the seeker's creativity and imagination. In the reading game, just as in the childhood game, parameters are established by the text, the author, and the genre as well as by the creativity of both author and reader.

The game of hide-and-go-seek also creates a space for the possibility of interaction with elements that are 'internal' and 'external' to the game itself. Internal interaction involves individual experience, creativity, imagination, and strategy, whereas external elements include objects, stories, references, and people encountered while playing. The external component also represents the possibility of exploring the social world. In the reading process, external elements are encountered primarily through intertextual references.

At the outset of hide-and-go-seek, the reader-seeker is invited to a game of interactive play. Indeed, one of the defining features of hide-and-go-seek is the active engagement of the "seeker." Searching out appropriate hiding places, applying one's own hermeneutic, is clearly a first step in the game. For example, readers are always searching the text for an imbedded or hidden meaning and attempt to draw conclusions based on their own experience. In the case of *Éléazar,* readers may follow different textual signs, dissect the character's names, exegete the Biblical text, or uncover different metaphors to negotiate a clear or concrete meaning for the text. Following

one's habitual reading strategy will undoubtedly privilege certain textual elements over others.

Our literary analysis of *Éléazar* is based on reader response theory, commonly associated with Wolfgang Iser. In *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1974), Iser develops the theory of literary effects (or reception theory), whereby "readers take active part in the composition of the novel's meaning" (xii). The meaning of the text lies not in the text itself but in the experience of reading. The reader engages in a game of hide-and-go-seek, or discovery,[1] of the text's meaning, the world of the novel, and the limitations of the reader's world. Iser follows the shift of focus of the novel from human nature (18th century) to identity and one's role in society (19th century) to perception and reality (20th century). Presently, the reader is "given the chance to discover himself" and discover one's underlying myths and assumptions (Iser xiv).

In the game of hide-and-go-seek there is usually one seeker and multiple hiders. Accordingly, readers may engage in multiple searches depending on where they look. Entertaining different solutions, hiding places, and traps is dependent on both author-hider and reader-seeker who obviously bring different experiences and strategies to the text. Yet there are virtually unlimited variations to the game because of the improvisation involved in play. The purpose of playing the game – to win or for the pleasure of play –helps to determine one's approach to and experience of the game.

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[1] Iser writes in his Introduction: "Linking all these essays [in *The Implied Reader*] is one dominant, and it seems to me, central theme: discovery. The reader discovers the meaning of the text, taking negation as his starting-point; he discovers a new reality through a fiction which, at least in part, is different from the world he himself is used to; and he discovers the deficiencies inherent in prevalent norms and in his own restricted behavior." (xii)

For *Éléazar* the boundaries of interpretation are shaped by one's familiarity with the author, the players, and the work's generic classification. As in the actual game of hide-and-go-seek, reading involves an 'initial hunt' which is informed by our previous experience or clues and hints that help us anticipate the play of the author/narrator (or hider). For Tournier the 'initial hunt' often involves the consideration of several key features that have been discerned by seasoned readers and critics of his corpus. These include: the title, the elements, symbols and metaphors, and etymologies relating to names.

Hide-and-go-seek as the key interpretive metaphor in *Éléazar* also involves a variety of searches: 1) I.D.: looking for Éléazar's identity, 2) the matching game: seeking Éléazar/Moses parallelism, 3) lost tonsils: detecting childhood initiatory experiences, 4) out of bounds: seeking the margins, 5) child find: searching for *l'enfant inspiré*, 6) lessons and facts: searching for Tournier's educational philosophy, and 7) the passage: tracing Éléazar's initiatory journey.

Our analysis will broaden to include a discussion of Tournier's game strategy and his use of humour. Other game metaphors also come into play: question and answer, opposites and inversions, disguises, playing inside a maze of intertextual references, and Tournier's ultimate game: the manoeuvring of myth.

After detailing our way of reading Tournier's *Éléazar,* we turn to the question of 'Why Play?' and attempt to clarify and complete our position on Tournier's use of the ludic. Are his tricks merely traps to dupe and ridicule the reader or is there more to his play? We conclude with an examination of *Éléazar* as a parable for the author-reader relationship.

Chapter I The Rules of the Game

The first step of any game is to establish rules: when to start, where to hide, what the boundaries are, who the players are, and how long the game will last.

Determining when the game is over is another important rule. The winner of hide-and-go-seek is either the last person left hiding or the seeker who finds everyone. In the game of literary interpretation, the winner can be arbitrary. For example, if readers are searching for certain elements within a text and find them, the game can be over. If, however, they are searching for the author's narrative voice, and find it hidden in different places, they may also claim victory. In yet another scenario, if the readers are unable to uncover hidden meanings or traces of the author's narrative voice, they may be declared losers.

So one important first step in setting boundaries is attaining a good grasp of the author, the players (whether they are critics or children), and finally, the genre of the text, be it a child's story or a culture's myth.

Author

The boundaries for Michel Tournier as an author are difficult to establish because of the ambiguous positions he holds as a writer for both children and adults, his unclear classification as an educator or ironist, and his indefinable Christian status.

Sketching the Author

In traditional criticism the reader is in search of an authorial voice presented through a narrator. Therefore, understanding the author and his or her style is one key to unlocking the meaning of the text.

Michel Tournier is best known for his mythic novels that blend the realistic and the fantastic. His unique works, such as *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967) – a reworking of Daniel DeFoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) – appeared on the literary scene at an opportune time. Readers had become somewhat tired of the experimentation of the *nouveau roman* of the 1950s and 1960s in France where authors like Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet had abandoned traditional plot and character, the markers of the classical French novel.

Starting with *Vendredi*, however, Tournier sets a trajectory in the opposite direction from these writers. In fact, he draws upon old myths, narratives, and fantasy, and then rewrites them from a new perspective. Although he maintains a traditional style, he infuses it with new meaning. Tournier has been included with contemporaries such as Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio and Patrick Modiano - a group of writers referred to as "les bricoleurs du roman" by Jacques Brenner (Thompson 23). This group of storytellers is recognized for their treatment of taboo topics (such as homosexuality, bestiality, and racism), their use of the ludic, as well as their ability to write for a dual (child/adult) readership.

Tournier's writings appeal to a wide reading audience including adults, children, and critics even though he insists that he writes primarily for children and not for adults, academics, and reviewers. The fact that his novels have decreased in size over the past thirty years may suggest a preference for the child reader. Furthermore, he has adopted the title of *conteur*.[2] It is possible that Tournier repetitively attempts to convey

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[2] Tournier claims that he has given up his vocation as a philosopher for the vocation of *conteur* or storyteller. Others have described Tournier as "un conteur invétéré" and "le prince des conteurs" (Gazier 17; Jay 145 in Beckett, *Conte* 57). *Conteurs* like Perrault, Grimm, and Andersen, whom Tournier admires, are also associated with tales that are simple yet profound. The *conteur* figures in many of

the image of a *conteur* of simple tales in order to distract from the otherwise weighty philosophical agenda of his writing. One needs only to look a little more closely to detect traces of Nietzchean irony or Bachelardian metaphysics that would not be easily grasped by the child reader.

A Children's Writer?

Tournier is fascinated by the curiosity, play, and sense of wonder that define childhood. It is arguable that his propensity toward the ludic is an attempt to keep alive the playfulness of children and to appeal to the child in every reader. He cherishes the role that children serve in challenging adults. In his texts, the sheer amusement and pure joy of childhood is often juxtaposed to the seriousness and rigidity of adulthood. One could venture to claim that the play of children can undo the seriousness of adults. From childhood, Tournier enjoyed playing the 'clown' in order to poke fun at the rigid structures of adulthood (Tournier, *VP* 38). According to Tournier, the clown provides "un modèle de lutte contre l'oppression de la société policée des adultes" (*VP* 38).

David Platten in *Michel Tournier and the Metaphor of Fiction* comments that "the idea of a child-friendly literary style goes to the heart of Tournier's fictional project" (5). Tournier's early desire to appeal to a younger readership typically entailed rewriting a condensed and simplified version of the original work.[3] Yet more recently, his style has evolved to the point where he now writes a single version that

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Tournier's pieces such as *La Medianoche amoureux* and *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar* (i.e. Sangali and Abdullah Fehr).

[3] As is the case with *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* and *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar*, both *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* and *Les Rois Mages* were condensed, with most of the philosophical discussion removed to form the children's version.

can appeal to mature and young readers alike. *Éléazar* is a rich example of this kind of dual-writing.

Although Tournier has written or rewritten texts destined for a younger readership, he does make a pointed distinction between (a) being a children's author and (b) being read and understood by children. He reinforces the difference between "[les livres] pour les jeunes et un livre que lisent les jeunes" (Beckett, *Romanciers* 122). Critics have speculated as to why Tournier so strongly resists the label of children's author. One possible reason is that at the beginning of Tournier's literary career in the 1960's, there were few children's authors and they were not well respected in France.[4] Children's literature had the stigma of being an inferior form of literature, sometimes called *para-littérature*. Tournier himself once called it a *pseudo-littérature* (Tournier, *Lycéens* 21). However, "dual-writing" eliminates the stigma associated with being a children's author. Other authors, such as J-M. G. Le Clézio, Jacques Prévert, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, have also qualified as dual writers at different points in their careers (Beckett, *Crosswriting* 34).[5]

We contend that Tournier emphasizes that he writes for a young readership to provoke the critics who struggle to understand his "simple" children's novels. While we believe that Tournier writes for a dual audience, and not primarily for one age group over another, his works may be more appealing to a child than an adult.

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[4] In 1953 Gallimard introduced their *La bibliothèque blanche* series that originally sought mainstream authors (and not children's authors) to write for a children's audience (Beckett, *Crosswriting* 34). It is only as recently as 1972 that they introduced a children's department. Likewise, Gallimard Folio did not introduce the three children's lines until much later: Folio Junior (ages 10-16) in 1977, Folio Benjamin (ages 5-7) in 1980 and Folio Cadet (ages 7-10) in 1983.

[5] *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is a classic dual-text which, as Sandra Beckett notes, has a dual dedication: "To Léon Werth and to Léon Werth when he was a little boy." (Beckett, *Crosswriting* 34). Jacques Prévert's *Contes pour enfants pas sages* (1947) is another example of a dual-text.

Prophet or Cynic?

Critics of Tournier can be divided into two basic categories: those who espouse an assertive view of him as a religious Christian or metaphysical writer (Petit, *La critique* 40-51), and those who have a more cynical view of Tournier as an ironist or a nihilist. The former follow an affirmative critique, while the latter, a subversive and skeptical one.

The Christian status of the author has been the subject of much debate and is further complicated by Tournier's elusive position. Tournier has a Roman Catholic heritage and education yet he rejects the institutional church. He is described as "foncièrement chrétien en dehors de toute question de pratique et de profession de foi" (Luk 10). In other words, he espouses a more personal and relational form of Christianity.

Readers who view Tournier as a Christian expect a text that reflects Christian values.[6] The text may contain a moral, may be a theological commentary, or may even be an example of a Christian hero. Fui Lee Luk traces Tournier's novels along the trajectory of Tournier's faith development from the Fall, to Redemption, and finally to Adoration.[7] *Éléazar* fits within the final stage, Adoration. Luk suggests that both the form and content of this novella reflect the total consecration of Tournier for God (158). In its form, *Éléazar* is mythic and twins the novella's protagonist with the

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[6] Michael Worton claims that Tournier writes "not to contradict the Church's teaching but to uncover and then to supplement the creative ambiguities in Genesis" (*Tournier* 32). Following Worton's lead we contend that *Éléazar* may have been written to supplement the creative ambiguities in the Exodus account.

[7] Tournier's earlier novels, such as *Vendredi, Le Roi des Aulnes* and *Les Météores,* reflect the first stage, the Fall of humankind. These novels depict the darker side of humanity, which Luk interprets as the sinfulness and marring of humanity. The second stage of Redemption is most poignantly revealed in his Christian novel *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar* wherein the figure of the Christ-child reconciles and redeems the preoccupations of the four Magi.

Biblical figure of Moses; in its content, the protagonist Éléazar strives to live devoted to his Christian faith, even to the point of death.

Luk's reading of *Éléazar* also privileges certain clues that support her preconceived or even 'prejudiced' view of Tournier as a Christian whose text is infused with moral meaning. This text may also be exemplary (i.e. following the example of Moses and Éléazar) or written to gain a better understanding of the Biblical text of Moses or of the God who is revealed to Moses in the desert. This approach will undoubtedly prove to be fruitful albeit limited since it may not allow for the possibility of a heretical or nihilistic reading of the narrative.

Jonathan Krell in *Tournier Élémentaire* claims that despite the rich Judeo–Christian mythology that pervades Tournier's works, he cannot be considered a "romancier chrétien" (*Element* 128). However, Krell underscores the rich metaphysical and elemental philosophy that impregnates his works and in particular *Éléazar.* For Krell, the search will be to uncover references to the elements and, in particular, to water and fire as foreshadowed in the title.

Cornelia Klettke, among others, envisages Tournier more as an ironist and cynic who functions primarily through the literary devices of irony, the *rire blanc*, inversion, and ambiguity. Tournier, according to Klettke, is far from being a Christian writer whose works are imbued with deep spiritual significance. Rather she suggests that Tournier is more of a nihilist. In fact, she views Tournier's use of irony as not merely playful but as mockery (Klettke, *L'art* 132-38).

We maintain that using Tournier's faith as a starting point for interpretation offers insight and enlightenment to our study. Still, this remains problematic because

the narrative voice of Tournier remains something of a mystery, if not an enigma. He may simply be ambiguous in order to evade critics but his motives are always multifarious and it is this very playful ambiguity (and his propensity for invoking the ludic) that may be the most revealing characteristic of both the writer and his works.

Teacher or Class Clown?

Tournier as a pedagogue is another of his passions that merits consideration. However, the notion of Tournier as an educator must be juxtaposed to that of Tournier as an ironist and cynic, or in other words, a clown. The clown pokes fun at reality and order and is generally not associated with learning. Tournier as a clown or master game-player will be discussed at length in Chapter IV.

Tournier enjoys spending time with children and especially visiting classrooms where they can discuss his books (Platten 5). The crowning point of success for Tournier is to be read in a scholastic context (Bureau, *Tournier*). The addition of Tournier's works, in particular *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* (1984), to a standard school curriculum enables him to more systematically and directly shape the minds of the next generation. This was a role Tournier had not been able to play early in life because of his failure at the *agrégation* in 1949. Had he passed this exam, he would have become a philosophy teacher. As a "failed professeur de philosophie," however, Tournier is able to produce what he labels a *philosophie de contrebande*, since he engages philosophical ideas in a non-traditional context – outside the academic arena.

A major preoccupation of Tournier is his concept of education which, taken very broadly, involves everything that prepares a child to enter into society. For Tournier, education is a delicate balance between initiation and instruction, for which he created

the following equation: Education = instruction + initiation (*VP* 19). In very basic terms, instruction and initiation can be understood as *informer* and *former*. Readers who believe that Tournier is an educator consistently look for these two components, instruction and initiation, throughout his works.

Instruction appeals to the intellectual and rational capacities of a child. Tournier's works are, not surprisingly, well-researched and incorporate philosophy, different theories of knowledge, facts, historical movements, and social commentary. The focus on the dissemination of knowledge is a more traditional form of didacticism. The French educational system provides a good example of this since its emphasis is traditionally based more on rote memory and facts rather than experiencing the world.

Initiation, on the other hand, underscores life experience and can be understood in terms of rites of passage. It encompasses the emotional, the magical, the religious, and the moral. Tournier defines the initiation of a child as follows: "l'initiation d'un enfant se fait par un double mouvement: entrée dans la société – principalement des hommes – éloignement du giron maternel. En somme, passage d'un état biologique à un statut social." (*VP* 19) Mircea Éliade defines initiation as "un ensemble de rites et d'enseignements oraux qui poursuit la modification radicale du statut religieux et du statut social… [et devenir] un autre" (*Naissance* 10). Through the initiatory process, the child enters into adulthood. In literature, initiation often involves purification and transformation with the end result being the redemption, salvation, or healing of the hero.

The initiatory role of education, according to Tournier, has been marginalized in our contemporary education system[8]: "Or il me semble justement que nous assistons dans l'histoire de l'éducation à une diminution progressive de la part d'initiation face à une information envahissante, et cela à un point qui est devenu depuis longtemps néfaste" (*VP* 58). Through his writing Tournier hopes to fill the initiatory gap in the education equation. As David Gascoigne states: "Clearly he intends his own writing for children to promote initiation in this [the proper development of the imagination and emotions] sense" (168). The use of initiatory archetypes, journeys and myths provide a model for imitation, understanding, and patterning for our own lives. While *Éléazar* combines both instructive and initiative components of education, the latter is more developed through the explicitly religious overtone, the use of the Moses prototype and the journey of the protagonist Éléazar.

Players

Can you have a game without players? Can you have a text without readers? A game does not really exist until it is embraced by its participants. Likewise, a text receives its significance when read.

For Tournier, the reception of the text is of primary importance. Platten explains: "Its value is determined by the effect it creates in the collective mind of its readership" (137). The shift in emphasis from production to reception is consistent with the postmodern climate that privileges the role of the reader and places greater emphasis

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[8] "Selon Tournier, la qualité de l'éducation a souffert d'un déplacement décisive et tragique…" (Bevan 21). Bevan indicates that Tournier pleads for a return to initiation, "a role that is lacking primarily because of the loss of religion, corporeal punishment, ethics and classics in the standard curriculum" (22).

on the reception of a work of art and the reader's role as co-creator in the literary enterprise.

Tournier illustrates this principle in his "Légende de la peinture", where two artists – one Greek, one Chinese – are asked to paint two halves of a ceiling (*MA* 259-263). The Chinese artist paints a beautiful garden, while the Greek artist makes a mirror. When the time comes to judge which painting is superior, the Greek artist is selected because through the mirror, the audience experiences joy in recognizing themselves in the painting. In the mirror image, the receptor is an active participant in a continually changing work of art and is therefore a co-creator. The idea of a shifting work of art radically changes our concept of absolute meaning or knowledge. Reality is revealed in the dialogue between the work of art, the artist, and the receptor. The value of the art is not just in its aesthetic value but also in its ability to engage the reader.

To return to our game analogy: there are variations of hide-and-go-seek depending on who is seeking and what is being sought. If playing with an infant or small child, you will show yourself more clearly than with older and more skilled players. We believe that Tournier's text lends itself to game-play/reading by children and adult alike. Within the text, there is an array of markers and clues that engage young and mature readers alike.

The Child Player/Reader

Tournier has claimed in an earlier interview that children are the best judges of an author's work (Bureau, *Tournier*). He has also claimed that he has truly succeeded as an author if he can be read by children (Beckett, *Crosswriting* 33). Sandra Beckett confirms, too, that "Tournier has increasingly turned to children as the ultimate critics of a literary text, and he now considers any work that does not meet with their approval to be a failure" (*Crosswriting* 33). *Éléazar* was dedicated to a twelve-year-old girl named Coralie to whom Tournier turns as a critic. He states: "S'il lui tombe des mains, j'estimerai qu'il est raté" (Payot 32-40).

Tournier's veneration of the child reader has puzzled many critics, who wonder why he sees children better fit than adults to interpret his complex texts. One possible answer lies in the difference between the reading processes encountered by young readers and mature readers. Experienced readers may encounter frustration with Tournier's style because they bring an ontological or epistemological framework to it. Young readers, on the contrary, who are more free of the constraints of a developed interpretive framework, avoid such reading roadblocks. While they may lack the training (or prejudices) of a critic, they are able to discriminate and appreciate textual elements. Platten remarks:

> [T]he child is also sensitive to narrative devices; children value repetition, suspense, and closure, the stock–in–trade of the *conteur.* Lastly, children need to believe in what they read. Even if the story deals in monsters and fairies, the sequence of events must be plausible, for without *vraisemblance*, or narrative verisimilitude, the storyteller loses his hypnotic hold over his audience. (177)

Child readers of *Éléazar* may not detect the etymological significance of the name Éléazar, but they would enjoy the suspense of the western adventure and the whimsical insights of the young Coralie at the very least.

The 'Super-Reader'

We have chosen the term 'super-reader' to designate literary critics who claim to have a superior view of text and author. The major shortcoming of super-readers is that they often apply a specific interpretive framework or grid that excludes elements from the story that do not adhere to their interpretive model. We have divided 'super-readers' of *Éléazar* into two camps: those who read the text for meaning and order and those who view it cynically as nihilistic or ironic. Tournier's habitual narrative techniques (such as his use of inversion, irony, and *détournement*) all support a nihilistic reading of his works whereas his use of metaphor, symbols, the elements, and a mythic substructure favour a more "meaningful" reading of his text. This distinction is rendered even more complicated by his multifarious use of irony.

Irony in *Éléazar* may be employed as a form of play or, more negatively, a form of mockery. Namely, the author may mock the reader who naïvely assumes that a proposition of his text is true. We would entertain the possibility of ironic mockery being aimed at critics who champion themselves as super-readers or interpreters of the text but who miss entirely the purpose of the author. The view we prefer, however, traces irony back to the original Greek meaning of the word as interrogation in which the reader must truly sift through what the author intended. According to this definition, irony is more gentle and probing than mocking and harsh. It can also subsume a pedagogical function. This process of questioning in order to foster

dialogue appeals to children who are likely habituated to the Socratic Method[9] in their scholastic context. (Dupriez 264-65)

Tournier's text *Éléazar* as the playing field for hide-and-go-seek provides ample room for play by children and adults alike. However, we would contend that child readers may find the game more enjoyable, since they are more flexible and are more easily able to juggle or play with different readings or meanings.

Genre

***Éléazar* - A Text for Children or Adults?**

If the text is the playing field, the classification of *Éléazar* as a piece for children or for adults is one of the most useful boundary markers since our expectations will vary depending on the author's target audience. In an interview with Beckett, Tournier explained that *Éléazar* was originally intended as a children's novel; however, when sent to the publishers it was marketed to an adult audience. The publishers obviously did not agree with the author's opinion as to appropriate reading audience and viewed the subject matter as more appealing to an adult readership. The underlying issue here has a great deal to do with the reception of the work. The debate as to what qualifies as children's literature or adult literature often seems to reflect different views about what is appropriate and enjoyable for children. Classification between children's and adult literature is often based on criteria such as the level of language, subject matter, and the complexity of the plotline. Notwithstanding the publishers' decision on *Éléazar*, Tournier maintains that an action-packed novella of only 114 pages should have a straightforward narrative and simple vocabulary to render it both accessible and

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[9] Socrates would ask questions and feign ignorance in order to level the dialogue and provide a mutual context for inquiry and the advancement of knowledge (Dupriez 264-65).

appealing to children between the ages of six and twelve. As he explains: "[J]e l'ai dédié à une petite fille qui s'appelle Coralie, qui a 12 ans, qui est une petite fille de mon village et elle l'a lu. Elle a 12 ans, elle l'a lu. Et donc c'est un livre que l'on peut lire à 12 ans. C'est donc assez bien" (Caruso). Of course it should be noted that while Coralie did read the book, there is no indication whether she enjoyed it or understood it. However, as an accomplished writer for children, Tournier has obviously developed a certain skill in writing for this audience. William Cloonan notes:

> When Tournier writes for children he is allowing for the limits of their life experience, but he is employing the same approach to literature that he uses in his adult novels. He tells an interesting story and does not indulge in stylistic complexities. A child can readily handle a straightforward narrative and an educated adult has little difficulty with some shifting of voice. However, within this traditional format Tournier manages to engender thoughts, suggest possible modes of behavior and viewpoints about others that take the reader into areas that he has perhaps not previously explored. (*Tournier* 36)

We agree with the description of *Éléazar* as "a tale to be read with the family" (Beckett, *Crosswriting* 51). The adventurous and action-packed narrative is a multi-layered story that can appeal to young and old alike. Beckett provides helpful insights into the shifting boundaries between children's and adult literature. She writes: "[T]he shift away from age as a defining category seems to be one of the markers of the post-postmodern age that is being ushered in with the new millennium" (Beckett, *Boundaries* xviii). Accordingly the label of an "all–ages writer" for Tournier may be the most fitting.

The Generic Rule

Generic classification is another essential boundary to be established by the literary critic or even the average reader who is grappling with the meaning of *Éléazar*. Unfortunately, to label *Éléazar* as a fable, *conte*, parable, or novella is insufficient in

order to establish its genre. The nuances between parable, *conte*, and novella are difficult to distinguish yet a brief discussion of this point will be helpful for our interpretation of *Éléazar* and for informing the reader's expectations.

The difficulty encountered when trying to discern a concrete meaning eliminates the fable as a genre since fables have a straightforward moral. In an interview Tournier responded to the question of the moral by asserting that it is "ce que l'on veut" (Payot 32-40). This ambiguous response reflects the multiple possible meanings inherent in the text.

The parable, the *conte*, and the novella therefore still remain as plausible options, since, in all three of these genres, meaning is not always easily discernable and there is a possibility of multiple meanings.

By virtue of its length *Éléazar* could be considered a novella. The novella as a literary genre predates the novel and is determined by a page length between 50-100 pages or word count between 30-40,000 words (which is longer than the short story but shorter than the novel). Yet the appeal of *Éléazar* to children lends itself more to the classic definition of *conte.* Tournier maintains that the *conte* has "une épaisseur glauque" where meaning is occluded like that revealed in reading Tarot cards (Beckett, *Conte* 58). By their ambiguous nature *contes* also appeal to more mature readers who read the tale at a different level. For Tournier, the *conte*, not the novella, has meaning and is edifying. In *Le Vol du Vampire* (1981), Tournier defines the *conte* as a novella that is "hanté par une signification fantomatique qui nous touche, nous enrichit, mais ne nous éclaire pas" (40). This distinction drawn by Tournier, however, does not reflect the commonly held definition which indicates that the novella can be edifying.

Indeed, Tournier may have created his own definition to maintain his status as a *conteur.*

A parable, on the other hand, is a short story rooted in day-to-day experience, with common images making vivid comparisons; it can be either secular or religious in nature (Seim 512-13; "Parable," defns. 1 and 2a). Biblical parables, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan or the return of the Prodigal Son (from the New Testament, Luke 10:25-37; 15:11-32), are widely read and recognized, even outside the religious sphere. An example of a more secular parable is *The Little Engine That Could.* Both these types of parables either attempt to communicate a truth about life or seek to motivate or facilitate a change in behavior. Still it is important to highlight that parables are not always easily understood and that they can be interpreted from different perspectives (Seim 513-14). *Éléazar* has been described as a modern parable and has been compared to the parables of Jesus since it is rich in metaphor and depth yet accessible to all. Others have suggested that Tournier's parabolic style in *Éléazar* is a mere mask for a deconstruction of the mythic genre. We agree with Fui Luk that *Éléazar* is written in an intentionally simple, parabolic style in order to render it more accessible to children. This is also consistent with Tournier's persistent desire to " rendre son écriture aussi limpide et parabolique que possible" (Luk 158). While *Éléazar* looks much like a modern-day parable, its length lends itself more to the classifications of novella and *conte.*

In light of this discussion, we have chosen to adopt both the generic classifications of novella and *conte* to inform our study. While the genre classification

of *Éléazar* poses some questions, the mythic substructure of the Moses narrative present in the novella cannot go unnoticed.

Mythic Clues

The mythic substructure of the Moses narrative from the Old Testament is the primary intertext in *Éléazar*; therefore, understanding the nature of myth is another clue in the game of literary analysis. There are a variety of definitions used to explain the nature and use of myth. Most commonly, myth is a sacred narrative that explains the origin of the world, mankind, God, or some particular reality.[10] The Biblical account of the creation found in Genesis is one such example. Other societies and religions have myths of cosmogony, such as the Babylonian *Enuma elish* about Marduk and Tiamat. Myths are culturally specific, "recount[ing] the activities of a culture's gods and heroes" (Vickery, *Myth* 806). The definition of myth for the present study is a summary of the views of Denis de Rougement and Claude Lévi-Strauss: "C'est une histoire qui se passé *'in illo tempore'*, au commencement des temps et qui fournit, en même temps, un schème d'une efficacité permanente pour comprendre un grand nombre de situations historiques." (Bouloumié, *Roman* 9)[11] Therefore, while myth is expressed within a particular culture, it transcends culture by its exemplary and archetypal features.

The narrative of Éléazar closely follows the Biblical story of the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt, which is an established 'universal story' – a narrative popular across cultures. As Platten remarks: "In theme and style it [*Éléazar*] equates to [Tournier's] ideal of the 'universal story', a narrative which should stretch across generations and

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[10] Unlike Voltaire, we nor Tournier will not consider myth as fiction, fabrication, or error (Vickery 807; Bouloumié, *Roman* 11).

[11] Myth is distinguished from legend by its sacred component (Bouloumié, *Roman* 9).

cultural divides" (203–204). The Exodus was a paradigmatic and foundational event in Israel's history. Through the Exodus that the Israel as a nation was created and came to better knowledge of God.[12]

By situating the Exodus narrative within the Irish potato famine and resulting mass migration to the New World, Tournier in *Éléazar* recaptures the intergenerational and transcultural qualities inherent in myth (Bouloumié *Roman* 9). By framing the narrative in light of the Exodus, Tournier implies that history repeats itself and that history can be understood in light of past experiences or myths. The transposition from Canaan to the United States and from the Israelites to the Irish further supports the notion that the narrative is not unique to one culture but that the Exodus experience can be lived regardless of culture or generation.

Myths have often been used to impart meaning, to order reality, or to serve as a model for life (Vickery, *Myth Criticism* 808-809). We cannot view myth, however, only through the traditional understanding, since Tournier also employs myth to deconstruct. Cloonan writes: "Myth for Tournier has nothing to do with social integration; it is a reminder of life's disorder" (Cloonan, *Tournier* 5). As Cloonan observes, Tournier seeks not so much a coherent story that will bring order and understanding, but rather a creative use of myth that will disrupt commonly held beliefs.

Having established the boundaries of the game of hide-and-go-seek, we will now begin the hunt.

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[12] God is revealed to the Hebrew people as the God who hears, delivers and saves. The Exodus is arguably the most powerful mighty deed in the Old Testament. In fact, the Jewish people still celebrate the Exodus in the ritual of the Passover meal.

Chapter II The Initial Hunt

In the traditional game of hide-and-go-seek, the seeker must anticipate the strategy of the hider. In the game of literary interpretation, the reader must predict the author's narrative intention. Searching for past experiences or traces of the author, looking for clues, attempting to uncover his secrets, are all part of the game. Young children who play hide-and-go-seek listen for noises and look for clues or traces of the hider that may help to direct them. Yet time and again the first hunt is either returning to a prior hiding place or revisiting the location where the hider had previously been found. Critics of Tournier have detected certain elements that recur in his corpus and that are helpful initial steps in our study of *Éléazar.* These components can be utilized as hints, leads, or clues among which the most prominent examples are the title, the elements of water and fire, symbols/metaphors, and the etymologies of names.

The Title

The importance of titles in the works of Tournier has been commented on by Platten when he writes: "Each of [Tournier's] titles designates a scenario, and each scenario solicits a metaphorical statement whereby Tournier articulates a vision of the world which is not literally real, but … metaphorically true" (xi). As foreshadowed in the title *Éléazar ou la source et le buisson*, Tournier uses his text to explore the symbols of fire and water. The dominance of these two symbols provide an illuminating stream and will be discussed under the heading "Water and Fire: Elementary Clues."

The title deftly evokes the Biblical intertext at two noticeable levels. The first word of the title, the name Éléazar, points the reader toward one of three characters in

the Old Testament, while the subtitle, *ou la source et le buisson,* situates the reader within the story of Moses.

Some readers who are familiar with contemporary reworkings of the Moses narrative would be pointed to André Chouraqui's novel *Moïse* (1995). Tournier himself claims in an interview that *Éléazar* was inspired by the question of Moses' refusal to enter the Promised Land that is explored in Chouarqui's novel (Payot 32-40; Chouraqui 204).

Tournier's title also creates a level of tension for the careful reader who will be curious as to how these two seemingly disparate concepts— *la source et le buisson* and the Éléazar narrative—are joined. It is interesting to note that the title of Jonathan Krell's English translation of *Éléazar* not only maintains the reference to Moses and Éléazar found in the original, but also inserts another layer with the subtitle, *Exodus to the West*. Indeed Krell's subtitle introduces yet another hermeneutical focus or slant to the game. He brings together the theme of journey with the references to both the Old Testament and the New World and at the same time fosters a reflection on the theme of the exodus and exile.[13]

The title is vital since it contextualizes and narrows our search and provides a fundamental clue in the interpretation of this work.

Water and Fire: Elementary Clues

As foreshadowed in *Éléazar's* subtitle, "la source et le buisson," a dominant pattern of the elements of water and fire can be discerned. The tension between these two elements serves to order the story and, in particular, the development of Éléazar's

[13] Tournier uses the term "exode" to refer to the passage from Ireland to the United States (*ESB* 65). As we will argue, the experience of exile and the movement of exodus is quite universal and is borne by many regardless of culture or generation.

character. While the other elements of earth and air are also present to a lesser degree, due to the parameters of this paper, they will not be included in our discussion. Tournier's use of the four elements can be traced to the theories of Gaston Bachelard,[14] who suggests that the elements can be viewed as metaphors of the human psyche. Bachelard's ideas are similar to those of Carl Jung, whose concept of the 'collective unconscious' is replete with primordial images and archetypes and where the role of metaphor is paramount. The presence and the use of the elements will therefore help to inform our reading of the novella and our rereading of the Moses narrative.

Water

Water is commonly understood as life-giving, purifying and a source of fertility (Aziza 78-84). Water is also associated with the feminine, and attributed to the maternal (mother's milk) and the sexual ("feminine nudity") (Bachelard, *L'Eau* 49, 155-180). Water is considered a lower element and is associated with humidity and coldness. The presence of water in Tournier's novella cannot go unnoticed. Tournier's description of Ireland is wet with references: *océan, vague, mer, brume, brise marine, vent marin* (11, 12, 21), *marécageux, ruisseaux* (13), *mouillé* (22), *l'eau impure et l'eau pure et limpide* (22-23).[15]

Tournier provides a brief survey of the importance of water in the Bible within his own text:

> Il s'avisait du rôle majeur de l'eau dans les Évangiles, eaux baptismales du Jourdain, pêches miraculeuses dans le lac de Tibériade, fontaines et puits où les femmes se rendent chargées des urnes et de cruches. Et il y avait ce mot de Jésus à la Samaritaine sur la margelle du puits de Jacob : *Quiconque boit de cette eau aura encore soif, mais celui qui boira de*

[14] Gaston Bachelard was Tournier's philosophy professor at the Sorbonne (Krell, *Eleazar* xi).
[15] My list of references is parallel to a list compiled by Erik Hermansen in "En quoi une œuvre littéraire gagne-t-elle à la présence de la musique." *(Pré)Publications* (1999): 24.

> *l'eau que je lui donnerai n'aura plus jamais soif. Bien plus, l'eau que je lui donnerai deviendra en lui une source jaillissante pour la vie éternelle* (Saint Jean, IV, 14). (*ESB* 20-21)

In these texts, water has the divine attributes of being life-giving and of touching the miraculous. Furthermore, the lush and fertile Irish landscape reinforces these qualities. Yet in the passage that follows, water is described as "eau impure, au goût acre et croupi" (*ESB* 21). Like the other elements, water is ambivalent and has both positive and negative attributes. For example, it can be the source of both life and death.[16]

In *Éléazar*, the departure from Ireland also marks a transition from fresh water to salt water as the travelers cross the Atlantic into which the corpses are sent to a watery grave (*ESB* 67). "Passing through the waters" echoes the Exodus experience of the Hebrew people as well as the later symbolic Christian act of baptism. In the desert, water is scarce. Following the logic of this elemental theory, the arrival in California marks the return of water, and paradoxically of the profane, since the settlers approach the Sacramento River and the Pacific Ocean.

Fire

For Bachelard, fire is the ultra-living element: both universal and intimate. It is associated with the hot and the dry.[17] Platten contrasts dryness and wetness:

> Dryness is equated with the Sinai desert and the Sierra Nevada; material poverty, the power of the mind, the adventure of the spirit, and an absolute lucidity that can be obtained only on recognition of God's omnipotence. The example of Moses. With wetness comes material well-being, squabbling churches, and the rotting away of moral standards symbolized by the legend in which it is said that Saint-Patrick rid Ireland of all the troublesome serpents, thus inadvertently removing all the principle of divine deterrence. (204)

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[16] Water is not always clear and pure. It can be dark and stagnant. Water is negatively associated with weeping, drowning, and the figure of Ophelia. (Aziza 78-84; Bachelard, *L'eau* 109-125).

[17] Fire is associated with the figures of Prometheus, the Phoenix, and Empedocles (Didier 186-88; Bachelard, *Psychanalyse* chs. 1 and 2).

Fire is obviously replete with significance within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In the Old Testament, God speaks to Moses in the burning bush, and God travels with the people of Israel in a pillar of fire by night. In the New Testament, the followers of Christ are said to have received tongues of fire at Pentecost. Moreover, fire is a symbol often associated with the Holy Spirit of God. Elsewhere in the Tournier corpus, apart from *Éléazar*, fire plays a central role. For example, in *Vendredi*, when there is an explosion on the island, the resulting fire is more redemptive than destructive because, while it destroys the island, the emphasis is on the enlightenment of Robinson. It is only after the explosion that Robinson is liberated from the constraints of his former life.

After water, fire is the other predominant element in *Éléazar.* In Ireland, however, fire is not resplendent but dim: le feu de la tourbe "un feu sombre, sans flammes, humide en quelque sorte, donnant de la chaleur certes, mais quelques flammèches bleuâtres pour toute lumière, comme doit être le feu de l'Enfer qui détruit sans éclairer" (*ESB* 23).

The hellish voyage aboard the ship and in particular the portrayal of the sick on the lower deck as a form of purgatory or hell evokes the image of fire. In the desert fire appears to Éléazar as in a burning bush. This fire is one that enlightens and refines without destroying. Éléazar is changed by his encounter with this divine fire and has a new perspective (*ESB* 101). Again in the desert fire plays a revelatory role, revealing the O'Braid family's position to the bandits.

Both water and fire are traditionally known as elements of purification (Bachelard, *L'eau* 181-203, *Psychanalyse* 163-75). It is important to underline that the

purification process is almost always painful (Krell, *Element* 127). The Flood in the Biblical account (Gen 6-9), where God sent rain for forty days and nights in order to cleanse the earth from the great sin of humanity, is one example of purification by water. Later on, still in Genesis, it is fire sent by God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities renowned for their sinful practices. These two examples of purification by water and fire found in the Biblical narrative are also mentioned in Tournier's text (*ESB* 33).

Fire is a supernatural element associated with hell, the Apocalypse, the infernal and the divine and plays both a destructive and purifying role. Fire, like the other elements, embodies both a positive and negative function. In the Western mindset, it may be argued that fire is more negative and destructive while water is often more positive and cleansing. However, Tournier inverts this assumption; fire is positive for Tournier. "Moïse est déchiré entre le buisson ardent et la Source d'eau vive, entre le sacré et le profane" (*ESB* 99).

Éléazar's journey from Ireland to the New World can be understood in one way as a passage from water to fire or in other words from the profane to the sacred.[18] This tension between water and fire is further detailed in the inscription on the Spanish Arch in the Irish community of Galway: "*En la lucha entre la agua y el fuego siempre es el fuege que muere*" ("In the battle between water and fire, it is always the fire that

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[18] Mircea Éliade discusses at length the paradox or opposition between the sacred and the profane in his work *The sacred and the profane: The Nature of Religion.* His first definition of the sacred is that it is opposite to profane. For Éliade the sacred and the profane represent two modes of being in the world, or in other words, two modes of existence (*Sacred* 14). Éléazar is depicted as a "religious" man par excellence with his vocation as a pastor. According to Éliade, the religious man wants to remain in a sacred universe, one that recognizes the transcendent. The profane mode of being in the world, according to Éliade is expressed in the desacralization of the nonreligious man of modern societies (*Sacred* 14).

dies"; *ESB* 22).[19] This suggests the triumph of water over fire in the first part of the novella. Throughout the journey, Éléazar's affinity for the *Burning Bush* of Moses and his own eventual death in the desert suggests a triumph of fire over water (*ESB* 100). Éléazar himself acknowledges that the revelation of the triumph of the fire was inspired by his time in the desert (*ESB* 101). The triumph of fire over water, however, is only temporary, since the O'Braid family eventually arrives in the "Promised Land."

The discussion of water and fire as elements also touches upon their metaphoric and symbolic representations. Several other metaphors in *Éléazar* will be considered in the following section.

Symbols and Metaphors: The Association Game

The creation of symbolic worlds abounding with metaphors infuses Tournier's fiction. As Tournier himself once said: "[T]he world is revealed through metaphor" (Platten 202). It is therefore wise to consider the symbols and metaphors present in the text as clues of guides to interpretation. A metaphor is "a figurative expression in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings" (Martin 760). The classical Aristotelian view of metaphor as transference or substitution is present yet ultimately inadequate to explain the uses of metaphor in Tournier's novella. The reader who "seeks" to find the meaning "hidden" behind the metaphor misses the sensory and cognitive functions within the text. On a fundamental level, Tournier uses metaphors, as he does myth, to cause the reader to question and reinterpret their understanding of the words or phrases themselves, to distinguish between the literal and the figurative. "Metaphor …marks the limits of the

[19] This Spanish proverb is an example of intertextuality in the Tournier corpus, since it appears in an earlier work, *Le miroir des idées* (1994), within a similar context of the opposition of water and fire.

distinctions between true and false, or between meaningful and deviant" (766). Platten underscores the unique and referential function of metaphor that can illuminate a new kind of realism through the imagination. In Tournier's works, metaphor therefore functions as a means of cognition, "a cognitive process which is relayed through the imagination" (Platten 15). Essentially, it helps to alter both perspective on the world and on specific objects (Platten 14). For Tournier, the process of "making associations" that is inherent to metaphors is also what he defines as one of primary ways to learn (Platten 202). Trying to decipher the metaphors in the text is also another game of discovery- the discovery of hidden worlds, and of more profound meaning.

A study of all the metaphors and symbols in *Éléazar* would obviously be the task of another thesis; therefore, we have chosen to limit our study to three key examples: the serpent, the harp and the angel.[20]

The Serpent

The serpent in *Éléazar* is very important[21] and one cannot miss the recurrence of this symbol. The significance of the serpent in the novella is ironic since the narrative begins in Ireland, a land said to have no snakes after Saint Patrick drove them all out. The narrator quips that Éléazar's staff, which is topped with a serpent head, is the only serpent in Ireland (*ESB* 26).

On the exodus west, as the O'Braid family journeys through the desert, the serpent resurfaces. It is in the desert, a natural habitation of cold-blooded serpents, where Benjamin, Éléazar's son, is bitten. Cora reflects on the fact that the serpent is

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[20] Note that the eye (of the snake), the desert and the walking staff are other significant examples of symbols and metaphors in the text. Two other dominant metaphors in *Éléazar* are water and fire; however, these will be considered in greater detail under the heading "Elementary Clues."

[21] "The serpent is one of the most important archetypes of the human soul" (Bachelard, *La terre* 212).

the animal incarnation of the desert (*ESB* 82-83). She explains : "Du désert il a la nudité, la sécheresse, la farouche austérité, la haine de toute autre vie. Il partage dans tout son corps l'ardeur des jours du désert et le froid de ses nuits" (*ESB* 83). One could argue that the Indian chief named *Serpent d'Airain* is the human incarnation of the serpent. It is he who with his serpent-like lidless eyes heals Benjamin of his snake bite (*ESB* 90). This interpretation is consistent with Walter Redfern's position that throughout Tournier's works, signs are incarnated in the flesh (317).

The *Serpent d'Airain* recounts his own mini-parable of the serpent, and in so doing opens a window onto the author's narrative voice. This precise parable appears again under the title "Déchiffrement du serpent" in Tournier's collection of essays entitled *Célébrations* (1999). This process of rewriting and reincorporating his own work into his writing mimics the repetition and recasting of myth and allows Tournier to attempt legitimating his own parable.

Traditionally in western culture and in Christianity, the serpent is seen as evil. Indeed the serpent is most widely recognized as the villain in the Genesis drama. In the Genesis account, the serpent deceives Adam and Eve by twisting the truth. God forbade Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil but the serpent with its craftiness, twists God's words and says they are not to *touch* nor to eat of the tree of good and evil or they will surely die.

Some argue that the serpent did not in fact lie, but that it is God who was the deceiver since Adam and Eve did not die when they ate the "forbidden fruit". In so doing, these critics invert the roles of God and Satan. While it is true that Adam and

Eve did not immediately die, they did become mortal beings and eventually tasted death.

The book of Genesis and the symbol of the serpent have both been the source of much contemplation for Tournier. What Tournier attempts to achieve through his own legend of the serpent and through the character of *Le Serpent d'Airain* is a deconstruction and inversion of the commonly held view of the serpent. Tournier invites readers once again to grapple with the symbol of the serpent, to look closely at its particularities, and to see it perhaps differently.

The most notable feature of the serpent is the fact that it has no eye lids. The serpent can thus be compared to God, who is omniscient and is said to have all-seeing eyes. This could also be viewed as a metaphor for the author, who, like God and the snake, may possess an omniscient or superior point of view regarding the text.

Another distinctive characteristic of serpents is that they can both heal and harm. Their means of killing provide an additional paradox since it is either through an embrace or a kiss. Tournier reinterprets the act of killing by suggesting that it is an act of love, albeit a perverse love. The serpent presents a new and ambiguous reality that clouds the division between life and death, and between love and deception. Both the profane and sacred are revealed through the enigmatic metaphor of the serpent who holds simultaneously the power to heal and the power to kill. And when the serpent kills, it does so in the guise of a loving act.

The serpent, with his healing qualities, is compared to God: "Ce regard nu qui blesse à mort et qui guérit, c'est tout le mystère de Dieu" (*ESB* 105). Yet a parallel can be drawn to Satan, the "father of lies" (John 8:44) because of the deceptive nature of

the serpent. The serpent, understood as a metaphor for Tournier's narrative voice, captures that voice's ambiguous nature.

By casting the serpent in a positive light – full of wisdom and healing, Tournier provides an apt example of the sanctification of all creation. Tournier ardently strives to render the profane sacred, thereby undoing a traditional and repressive way of viewing all creatures. Tournier writes that "the good news of the gospel was not to enhance people's concept of heaven, but to enhance their love for the earth" (Cloonan, *Tournier* 98). His love for the earth incorporates all animals, including repellent reptiles like the serpent.

The Harp

The harp is another symbol that is impregnated with significance. It is a deliberate and brilliant choice of instrument. In fact, the harp is the official political symbol of Ireland. In *Éléazar* the narrator also recognizes the deep symbolism of the harp in Irish culture: "Mais n'était-ce pas l'âme de leur chère Irlande qu'ils emporteraient ainsi avec eux?" (*ESB* 50). Later, in the desert, harp playing is again compared to the richness of Irish culture: "C'était vraiment la voix des sources de la verte Irlande qui s'élevait au milieu de l'aridité du désert" (*ESB* 110).

In classic Irish mythology, the harp is a cosmic symbol considered to be both soothing and magical. According to Celtic mythology it is associated with Daghda, the Celtic great father god of protection and abundance (McKillop). One cannot miss the great importance accorded to Esther's harp in *Éléazar.* In many ways, too, a parallel can be drawn between the Celtic harp and the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament. More specifically, the Ark of the Covenant was the place where God's

presence dwelt and as such was a source of protection for the Israelites. Furthermore, the people of Israel had to carefully carry it with them on their journey through the desert. This is much like Esther's awkwardly large harp that had to be carried throughout the journey in *Éléazar* at all costs. The harp's divine presence even serves to protect the O'Braid family from harm, as will be discussed below.

In the Bible the harp is used as an instrument of worship (1 Chron 16:5; 25:1-7) and most commonly associated with the Biblical character David, who played the harp both to worship God and to please and placate the deranged king, Saul (1 Sam 16:23; 1 Sam 18:9-11). When David played the harp, the evil spirit that had come upon King Saul would depart and the king would be restored to peace. The harp is also symbolic of worship in heaven and of celestial music in general (Rev 5:8; 15:2). It represents contemplation, hope, thoughtfulness, gentleness and contact with the spiritual realm. Similarly Esther's harp playing in *Éléazar* evokes overtones of the angelic and of worship. When the O'Braid family is in the desert, harp music accompanied by singing has a captivating and transformative effect upon the bandit José le Cruel. He initially seeks to destroy the family yet is lured by the music and begins longing to join in the singing and to help the family (*ESB* 110).

The Angel

Tournier uses a dialogue between Esther and Éléazar as a pretext for entering into a theological discussion on angels. The doctrine on angels is historically a point of contention between Catholics and Protestants. The text specifies: "La théologie protestante traite avec méfiance ces créatures indéfinissables qui encouragent – comme le peuple innombrable des saints – la malheureuse inclination des catholiques au

polythéisme" (*ESB* 30-31). This discussion invites readers to reflect on the meaning, symbol, and mission of the angel.

For the average reader in western culture, angels are traditionally associated with good, such as the figure of the guardian angel (Matt 18:10) (*ESB* 31). However, through the voice of Esther, Tournier is quick to point out that within the Biblical record there are bad angels as well. The Nephilim are angels in the Genesis account (Gen 6:4) who are associated with the Flood and considered to be evil (*ESB* 32). Satan, or Lucifier, is the prime example of a bad angel. He is not only described as a fallen angel but is known as the leader of demons (or bad angels). By exposing both the positive and negative examples of angels, Tournier thus reminds us of their ambiguous nature.

Esther's main contribution to the discussion of angels is her explanation of their mission. The angel, with its combination of wings and arms, is able to touch both the earth and the sky. As the narrator says: "Ce n'est pas une mince alternative. Elle signifie qu'il faut choisir entre agir et planer, se compromettre dans la vie quotidienne ou survoler les choses et les êtres" (*ESB* 32). We would argue that the tension that is borne by angels in living between the earth and the sky is precisely the tension that is faced by Éléazar and by Moses. The angel, therefore, serves as a metaphor for Éléazar and Moses, who both mediate between heaven and earth and between God and the people.

Our survey of the serpent, the harp, and the angel reveals of course only a portion of Tournier's the extensive referential use of metaphor. The harp functions primarily to illuminate reality and serves as an entry point for further reflection on its

celestial, national (Ireland), mythological (Celtic) and Biblical dimensions. The harp in *Éléazar* also has a protective function like the Biblical ark of the covenant (and David's use of the harp with King Saul). The angel on the other hand functions primarily as a metaphor for the mission and role of Éléazar. Most importantly perhaps is Tournier's treatment of the serpent which expands one's understanding of the serpent to include not only the evil and crafty dimensions, but also those of wisdom and healing. Tournier uses the metaphor of the serpent to challenge the commonly held association of the serpent with evil. As well, one's view of healing and wisdom begins to take on a symbolic representation in the serpent. Each of the metaphors that we have considered is a clue that helps to inform and advance our search and reading of *Éléazar.*

Etymologies: The Name Game

Much like the metaphors considered above, names can also contain a deeper meaning or point to a more elaborate reality. In the Bible and in many cultures, the act of naming is imbued with significance and often indicates the character and destiny of an individual. Naming is essentially a calling into being. In the Old Testament, specifically, naming begins in the Garden of Eden with Adam's responsibility to name the animals (Gen 2:19-20) as well as Eve (Gen 2:23). Adam named his partner Eve because "she was the mother of all the living."[22] Jacob ("he who grasps after," Gen 26:21-26) grasped after his brother Esau's birthright. His name is later changed to Israel ("God saves," Gen 32:22-32) after he wrestles with God and is redeemed of his past actions. The naming tradition continues into the New Testament. For example,

[22] It is thought that the Hebrew name *Eve* means living. See the *New International Version* of the Bible textual footnote, Gen 2:23.

Jesus renames his first disciple, Simon, Peter, which means *rock* (John 1:42). Later, Jesus explains that Peter will be the leader of the church, and "on this rock I will build my church" (Matt 16:18). These are just a few examples of Biblical characters whose names are also indicative of their destiny and, in particular, their religious journey.

Arlette Bouloumié, in her discussion on myth and naming, suggests that naming in myths calls subjects into being, and infuses them with sacredness. She writes:

> Pour Michel Tournier, grand lecteur de la *Bible,* nommer, c'est appeler à l'existence. Le nom est essence, principe d'existence, il engendre l'être ou l'objet qu'il désigne. Lorsqu'il nomme ses personnages le romancier retrouve la force créatrice du verbe originel et du démiurge. (*Roman* 41)

Naming in myths is likened to an act of creation – an almost supernatural act that explains the sacred overtones involved in the process. This metaphysical dimension of naming in myths also adds to the heroic and divine qualities often associated with mythological figures.

Like other mythic writers, Tournier has discovered the semantic force of naming and accords special importance to names in his writing. He invites readers to play the name game as they consider the multiple ramifications (the related homophones as well as etymology) of each character's proper name.

Éléazar

The name *Éléazar* immediately brings to mind the Biblical character. The etymology of the name is Hebrew and means 'God has helped,' 'God helpeth,' or 'help of God.' There are three different Éléazars in the Bible; however, the most recognized reference is to Éléazar, the high priest, the third son of Aaron, and the nephew of Moses.[23] In the Moses narrative, Éléazar served as priest and chief leader of

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[23] It is also interesting to note that one of Moses' sons is named Éliezer, a homophone to Éléazar.

the Levites and was mentored by Moses. He was appointed over those responsible for the care of the sanctuary and is one of Moses' successors. Éléazar, along with Joshua, partitioned the land of Canaan among the tribes of Israel (Num 34:17).[24] Essentially Moses serves as a mentor and example for the Biblical Éléazar.

In Tournier's *conte*, Éléazar also looks to the Biblical figure of Moses as a mentor or helper. The parallels between Moses and the fictitious Éléazar are found in Table 3.1 under the heading, "The matching game."[25]

The meaning of the name can be embedded not just in the etymology and literary significance of names, but also in their sound. The name of the protagonist lends itself very well to this analysis. When sounding out the name *Éléazar*, one hears "Et les hasards," and in an interview with Marianne Payot, Tournier explains: "J'aime les jeux de mots; phonétiquement vous entendez et les hasards" (Payot, *Lire* 32-40). The name of the protagonist therefore has two different meanings: one is "God helps" and the other, "chance". As Redfern comments, "[W]ord play depends on and fosters ambivalence. It is a dangerous game." (312)

Éléazar's family name in the novella is O'Braid, which we would argue draws from the English word "braid", which meaning "to interweave," "to twine" or "to twist". The name O'Braid may also be symbolic of Tournier's writing process which can be viewed as a *bricolage* or a process, of interweaving different textual references.

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[24] He is also present when the daughters of Zelophehad request an inheritance of land, because their father had died, despite the fact that they were women (a request that was granted) (Num 27:1-11).
[25] See Chapter III, p. 46.

Esther

The name Esther unmistakeably makes reference to the Biblical heroine for whom the book of Esther was written. Esther saved the Jewish people from a massacre and is recognised for her courage, wisdom, and patience. Her name, however, is not Hebrew and is more likely a Persian derivative of "stara," which means star. It may also be derived from "Ishtar," who was a Babylonian goddess.

Tournier claims that this character, and in particular the incident where Éléazar asks Esther's parents for her hand in marriage, is based on a parallel incident involving a Swiss-French friend. However, one must not overlook the parallels with the Biblical heroine.

The Biblical Esther is renowned for her beauty and her gentle persuasive voice. Likewise, in the novella, Esther's voice, often accompanied by the harp, is equally beautiful and powerful. She also gives her opinion boldly. Still, her strong voice is diminished when her daughter Cora enters into the narrative.[26]

Another defining feature of the Biblical Esther is that she is a hero despite being an outsider, a minority, and a woman in a patriarchal Persian context. In Tournier's novella, Esther's most distinctive feature is that she is crippled. She is also the daughter of a wealthy Irish-Catholic family; however by marrying Éléazar, a Protestant pastor, she alienates herself from the society of her youth. A final consideration for Esther in the game of naming is her family name, Killeen. In Celtic Killen means

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[26] Mairi Maclean comments on the role of female characters in Tournier's works and in particular *Éléazar*. She notes that. "Esther and Coralie are presented in a more favourable light than the other female characters in previous works, although Esther is not developed as a character. The painted, perfumed women who invite Éléazar to their brothel provide a more characteristic view of womanhood (*ESB* 79)" (Maclean 165).

"little church," a name that is fitting given Esther's propensity for theological discussion.

Coralie

The name of the young girl, Coralie, is distinct among those given to the other O'Braid family members and even to the other main characters in the book. Unlike Esther or Éléazar, Coralie's name is entirely non-Biblical. As such, one must consider the etymological and phonetic origins of the name Coralie and its shortened form, Cora, which Tournier employs throughout the novella.

The name *Cora* (κορα) comes from the Greek for "maiden" or "hummingbird." In classical mythology, Kora/Khora is the name of the goddess of the underworld, and phonetically Coralie is related to the words: *Corps/Cor/Chorale/Corral/Corail/Corps à Lit/Corps à Lys*. In Latin *Cor* finds its English equivalent in *heart* and in Hebrew *Cor* is a measure of liquid. The French word *Corps* means body, while *Chorale* is a choir and *Corail* is the sea animal coral. We prefer the French word, *Chorale*, which conveys the image of voices—perhaps a voice that should be heard.

Tournier's choice of Coralie makes it difficult to pinpoint the exact meaning of her name; however, we can conclude that her name is unique among the other names for a reason and we would argue that special attention should be given to her character. Of course, one must not exclude the possibility that Tournier's choice of the name *Cora* does not hold any particular significance. It is not outside of the realm of possibilities that Tournier has chosen a name with no etymological significance in order to 'play' with readers who are searching for meaning. Finally, as previously

mentioned, the book was dedicated to a young girl named Coralie, who may indeed be the inspiration for this character.

Benjamin

The Hebrew for Benjamin is "son of my right hand" or "son of south." In the Bible, Benjamin is the youngest son of Jacob and Rachel (Gen 35:8), and one of the favoured siblings among the twelve. Later in Israel's history, it is Benjamin's tribe that helps to establish the southern kingdom of Judah (1 Kings 12:20-24).

In *Éléazar*, Benjamin is also the youngest son. In France, interestingly enough, the youngest child is referred to as "le benjamin." Benjamin's place of importance is significant in both the novella and the Old Testament, since the practice is in fact an inversion of the common practice of blessing the eldest.[27] It is Jacob, the younger sibling, for instance, and not Esau, who receives the blessing from his father (Gen 27:1-40). Jacob himself blesses Joseph's younger son, Ephraim, over Manasseh, even though Joseph tries to move his hands (Gen 48:1-22). As well, even though Benjamin was the last born, he is afforded a place of honour since he was born of Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, who died giving birth to him. During the famine years, Jacob even prevents Benjamin from joining his brothers on their reconnaissance to Egypt for food, for fear that Benjamin, like Rachel's other son, Joseph, would be killed.

In Tournier's novella Benjamin is characterised by language that echoes Biblical heroes such as Samuel and Jesus: "Des années passèrent. Benjamin grandissait en force et en sagesse." (*ESB* 40; see 1 Sam 2:26; Luke 2:52) In *Éléazar*, Benjamin, too, faces the possibility of death. The life-threatening circumstances, just as in the Old Testament, heighten the tension as to whether Benjamin will be able to fulfill his

[27] In fairy tales, the youngest brother is a stock character and often is the hero.

father's dreams. For the careful reader, the story of father and son and sacrifice echoes the tension surrounding the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. God had promised to give Abraham many children. Yet when he only had one son in his old age, God asked him to sacrifice that child as a test of his fidelity. Éléazar even remarks that his son's life-threatening illness must be a test; God would not take the life of his child. With Benjamin, Tournier introduces the theme of the youngest and reflects the Biblical inversion of blessing, as well as the promise of hope for the future.

Le Serpent d'Airain

The name of the Indian chief is a play on words for the staff that Moses makes out of bronze while he and the people of Israel are wandering in the wilderness. In the Biblical account, God sent venomous snakes to punish the Hebrew people. However, Moses prayed to God for mercy and God provided a way for those who were bitten to live. In fact, those who were poisoned survived if they looked at the bronze staff (Num 21:4-9). In French, this staff of Moses is called un *serpent d'airain*. Like Moses' bronze serpent, the Indian chief is the source of healing for Benjamin after his poisonous snake bite. The little boy opens his eyes, looks at the Serpent d'Airain, a lidless man, moans, and then begins to recuperate.

The Hope

The Hope or *l'Espoir* is the ship that transports the O'Braid family to the New World. However, despite the positive connotations of the word hope, Éléazar and his family quickly realize that *The Hope* is none other than a floating infirmary – and eventual morgue – for the countless hundreds below deck. While the destination of the

New World would be consistent with the name *Hope*, the presence of a significant population on the ship who are awaiting death is clearly the contrary.

The sick aboard *The Hope* are allowed passage because they have the necessary money to pay their way, just as the dead with a coin in their mouths in ancient Greece were able to cross the River Styx to the underworld. Clearly this is the mythology to which Éléazar refers. The other reference to mythology is the quote from Plutarch: "Il n'est pas nécessaire de vivre. Il est nécessaire de naviguer," which provides the foundation for Éléazar's interpretation of these events and the paradigmatic beginning to his personal transformation on the journey (*ESB* 59).

Plutarch interprets life as a prelude of death. For the sick on the ship, this is clearly true; but Éléazar (like Plutarch) interprets all of life in this context. Life is not fundamentally about living but rather "navigating" toward death. If life is more about death than life itself, then Éléazar needs to be prepared to die. He must come to terms with his past and face the challenge of an unknown future.

In some sense, Éléazar himself has paid the price for his passage to death. He, too, did not want to waste away in a prison for his crime or live with the guilt of the crime in Ireland. This scene (as well as the parallel to Moses' failure to cross the Jordan into Canaan and his death on Mount Tabor) foreshadows Éléazar's inevitable death on the journey to California.

By drawing from both Greek mythology and Plutarch, Tournier plays out an inversion of the common association of hope and life for hope and death. The passage toward death becomes intrinsically hopeful.

José

José le Cruel, a bandit who is part of the outlaw group 'La Main Rouge,' initially plots to rob the O'Braid family yet experiences a transformation in the desert. He instead helps to defend the O'Braid family and, after the death of Éléazar, helps the family to survive (*ESB* 120). He eventually leads the family from the desert into the promised land of California. In leading the family to California, this José (a Spanish name) fills the Biblical role of Joshua who succeeded Moses and led the Israelites into the Promised Land.

Our primary discovery in playing the name game is that the names of the characters serve to reinforce the Biblical intertext with the single exception of the name, Coralie. The fact that her name does not fit the pattern and stands out above the rest suggests that her character is of primary importance in achieving an understanding of the novella. This game may spur the reader to search out or rediscover the Biblical characters and stories from whence their names derive.

We pass now from the initial stages of the hunt- a phase where we look for clues and hints- to a phase in the game that involves more profound searches. As players embarking on different trails, we long each time to hear the voice of the hider saying "you are getting hotter".

Chapter III "Getting Hotter"

When children play hide-and-go-seek, each clue (a sound or a glimpse of coloured clothing) they find leads them farther on their search. In *Éléazar*, textual markers point to seven well-marked trails.[28] Each path may lead to the "hider"[29] or may be false clues left to distract and mislead.

1. ID: Looking for Éléazar's Identity

One of the major trails that can be followed in Tournier's *conte* is the protagonist Éléazar's quest for identity. Bouloumié has discerned a pattern in Tournier's works wherein the protagonists understand their identity and destiny in light of a mythic prototype (*Réécriture* 34). Christopher Anderson also acknowledges the search for self-understanding but does not limit it to a simple identification with a mythic figure (*Myth* 160). For example, in *Le Roi des Aulnes,* Abel Tiffauges comes to understand his identity and destiny in light of the myths of the ogre and of Saint Christopher (Bouloumié, *Réécriture* 34). Anderson also exposes other factors that impinge upon Tiffauges' identity. He writes: "Tiffauges has created his identity as ogre from a pair of myths, childhood memories, etymology, and the reinterpretation of signs" (*Myth* 160).

We would argue that the identity Éléazar creates for himself is primarily based on the mythic figure of Moses. Yet his identity is also mitigated by two formative childhood experiences, the marginality of his character, and the etymology of his

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[28] Textual markers and various searches abound; yet the present study has been limited to these seven. The treatment of each will, of necessity, be brief.

[29] What is being sought after in the reading game differs depending on the approach of the reader. Therefore, we have used the ambiguous term "hider"

name. These dimensions will be explored in the following sections while the etymology of his name was discussed earlier.

2. The Matching Game: Seeking Éléazar/Moses Parallelism

Éléazar, like many Tournier protagonists before him, searches for a way to comprehend and order his life and experience. As Christopher Rivers writes: "[Tournier's] characters share another significant quality: a maniacal desire for order, for systems of interpretation, for explanation of their experience" (116). Similarly, Gascoigne claims: "In each case Tournier's fiction describes a particular dialogue, or dialectic, between the external world and the character's own sense of special destiny. The character often claims, explicitly or implicitly, to be decoding a language of signs and events in his ongoing experience." (193) The protagonist Éléazar uses the figure of Moses to illuminate his own identity and destiny (*ESB* 96). Tournier's choice of Moses as the mythic prototype is powerful since he is arguably one of the most important figures of the Judeo-Christian mindset and a figure whose life has symbolic value. Once again Tournier draws from his favorite intertextual source – the Old Testament. While Tournier primarily uses Genesis, in *Éléazar*, he draws, in particular, on the story of the Exodus (Milne 1993; Worton, *Tournier* 70). [30]

Moses was a Hebrew born in Egypt. The Pharaoh at the time of his birth was afraid that the Hebrew people were getting too strong and ordered all the male children to be killed. Since Moses' mother wanted to prevent his death, she made a basket of reeds and placed the baby in the river Nile. Moses was discovered by an Egyptian princess, who found him so beautiful that she decided to keep him and raise him in

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[30] Interestingly enough, Tournier does not wholly depart from his passion of reworking the Genesis (creation) account since the Exodus is well-established as a second creation account.

Pharaoh's household. When he was a young man, Moses witnessed the ways in which the Hebrew people were oppressed and killed an Egyptian who was mistreating a Hebrew. His crime having been discovered, he fled to the desert. There he was married and had two sons. Years passed and God spoke to Moses through a burning bush, telling him that He had heard the suffering of the Hebrew people and had elected him to lead them out of slavery and into the Promised Land. While in the desert Moses became exasperated by the groaning and complaining of his people. In anger he struck the rock twice and was chastised by God for this act of disobedience. In fact, Moses was never allowed to enter the Promised Land of Canaan and died in the desert.

Éléazar's actions are structured in light of the Moses narrative and can be viewed as predetermined in the text. Tournier writes: "Chez moi, c'est différent, c'est le mécanisme mythologique et symbolique qui est si contraignant qu'il détermine entièrement l'action des personnages" (*VP* 166). What begins with an idealization for Éléazar ends in a virtual incarnation of Moses' death on the brink of the Promised Land. The narrator clarifies: "Il n'était pas un fou qui se prenait pour Moïse" (*ESB* 95). We question this comment by the narrator; however, it is possible that Éléazar may have actually been deluded into thinking that he is Moses and thereby foolishly loses his identity and eventually his life. Is it not irrational to leave the mass of pioneers and venture into the unknown alone, simply to follow in Moses' footsteps? This being said, it is also possible that his actions are the result of an earnest desire to follow God – a God who is revealed in the Bible through stories and heroes such as Moses. This is consistent once again with Éliade's argument that religious man desires to live in a

sacred world, which is often manifested through imitating a heroic or mythic figure (*Sacred* 100).

As readers of *Éléazar* uncover the parallels between these two figures, they are entering a simple game of matching. The game appears to be played at the beginner level since the narrator carefully explicates the parallels between the two narratives. In our text there are many similarities between Moses and Éléazar. For example, the tension that Moses experiences between the *source* and the *buisson* is first relived by Éléazar in the tension between the moist and humid Ireland and the dry and arid American desert. It is also the struggle between the sacred and the profane, between the demands of his family and the demands of his God and in his final struggle, the struggle between reason and faith. Like his namesake, Moses, which means 'for I drew him out of water' (Exo 2:10), Éléazar is also drawn out of rainy and humid Ireland. We have ventured to play the matching game and our results are summarized in the following table:

Table 3.1 The game of matching: Éléazar and Moses

Éléazar	**Moses**
Protestant in a Catholic country	Hebrew in an Egyptian land (Exo 1)
Murder of the "agent du propriétaire" beating the shepherd boy	Murder of the Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave (Exo 2:11-12)
Fled Ireland with wife and children	Fled Egypt (Exo 2:15)
The potato famine, and typhus and cholera on the boat	The plagues of Egypt (Exo 7:14-11:10)
The goal of the voyage: California	The promised land: Canaan (Exo 3:8)
The boa stick	Moses' walking staff which turned into a serpent (Exo 7:8-13)
Crossing the Atlantic	Crossing the Red Sea (Exo 13:17-14:31)
40 day of the sea voyage	40 days fast on Mt. Sinai (Exo 34:28)
The serpent who bit Benjamin	The serpents who bit the Israelites (Num 21:6)
Benjamin looks to the "Bronze Serpent" to be healed	The salvation of the Israelites who look at the bronze serpent (Num 21:7-9)
The combat with the raiders won with the help of José	The fight against the Amalekites won by Joshua (Joshua 17:8-16)
The Celtic harp taken on the journey	The ark of the covenant (Exo 25:10-20)
The plain of California	The Promised Land – seen from the mountains (Deut 32:48-52)
José leading the O'Braid family into the Promised Land as a successor to Éléazar	Joshua leads the Israelites into the Promised land as the successor of Moses (Josh 1)
The blueberries to feed the O'Braids	Manna for the Hebrews (Exo 16:1-36)

On long car journeys, children enjoy playing the game where they compare two pictures and try to find what is the same and what is different. Interestingly enough, children who play games of same and different are almost always attracted by what is different. In our story, the most notable elision is the disobedience of Moses in the desert. This missing element is problematic since Tournier claims that the question that drives the novella is God's refusal to let Moses enter the Promised Land – a refusal based on his sin of disobedience. "Mais c'était surtout l'entrée en pays de Canaan qui prenait aux yeux d'Eléazar une signification redoutable" (*ESB* 96). In Tournier's version, however, there is no such act of disobedience which would prevent the entry

into the Promised Land. Attempting to retrace the narrative is futile since Tournier does not simply repeat the plot line. Cloonan records a similar process in *Le Roi des Aulnes:* "At one point in the novel the readers are tempted to do what Abel constantly does: see profound similarities where they really do not exist" (Cloonan in Worton, *Tournier* 180). It is as if Tournier is teasing readers with the verisimilitude of these two narratives. The lack of a parallel plot line has led some critics to favour a ludic reading wherein the *rire blanc* is paramount. On the other hand, some readers attempt to extract a moral or meaning when such a reading is not clear.

The ludic explanation is not the only possible interpretation. The manner in which Éléazar interprets events, his own emotions, and circumstances through the life of Moses has been also said to represent an ideological stance for Tournier. For Tournier, the events of the present can only be understood and have meaning through the lens of the past:

> Pour Michel Tournier le Dieu d'Israël n'est pas un Dieu abstrait mais un protecteur que l'on reconnaît à travers les événements de la vie quotidienne: les événements d'aujourd'hui ne peuvent se comprendre qu'en méditant les événements d'autrefois: la vie a un sens, ce n'est pas une simple succession d'événements mais une reprise, une répétition de l'essentiel, de l'origine: mélange de foi, de poésie et de rationalité malgré tout. (Philagora *Eléazar*)

Tournier's motivation in using such parallelism, therefore, goes beyond mere contemplation. Through the protagonist Éléazar, the reader is invited to reconsider the hero of faith, Moses. Furthermore, readers are provided with an example of how they can understand themselves, their identity, and their destiny in light of a mythic figure. According to Éliade, by imitating the exemplary life of mythic heroes, the religious

man maintains a connection to the sacred while concurrently making the world more sacred through the reactualization of divine paradigms (*Sacred* 98-99).

Gascoigne aptly remarks:

> Tournier's fictions constantly present themselves as *exemplary,* in the sense that the human lives they recount are not seen as merely individual and accidental but as realisations of a pattern which transcends them and which it is an important purpose of the narrative to suggest or to reveal. This is in turn linked to Tournier's preference for human mythological prototypes: the castaway, the ogre, the twin, the saint. With such subjects, the account of a single life may be used to discover truths about an exceptional but potentially exemplary mode of being in the world, from which ordinary mortals may learn. (193)

Moses as a mythic prototype is an unlikely hero because he was abandoned at birth, an immigrant, and a fugitive. Yet Moses is given a second chance and leads the Hebrew people to the Promised Land. Tournier's Éléazar finds hope for his future (after his crime in Ireland) and direction for his life by identifying with Moses' life and death.

Readers of Tournier are often enticed by the game of matching yet must critically assess whether or not the profound similarities that Éléazar sees really exist. They must also reflect on why they are playing the game. For example, are we matching in order to pattern our own lives, to deconstruct the mythic prototype, or simply to amuse ourselves? It is reasonable to summarize, however, that the two most valid readings of the Moses and Éléazar matching game are the exemplary and the ludic.

3. Lost Tonsils: Detecting Childhood Initiatory Experiences

Children are always searching for lost items – teddy bears, blankets, books – items that bring comfort. Christiane Baroche was perhaps the first to point out that Tournier, through his writings, strives to heal from the scarring childhood experience of having his tonsils brutally removed. She writes: "Once this has been understood, all of Tournier's work has to be reread as a quest for recuperation…he is in search of his lost tonsils" (54).[31] Baroche clarifies that the goal of Tournier's writing, however, is not to derive a cure for the burden of childhood pain but rather to provide a balm that allows us to heal from these painful initiatory experiences.

The protagonist Éléazar has two significant formative childhood memories. His first scarring experience is the inability to follow his desire to become an *ébéniste*, the cabinetmaker he dreamt of becoming in his childhood (*ESB* 13). The narrative explains the young Éléazar's sadness: "Éléazar comptait bien entrer en apprentissage avec ce Charlton avec lequel il s'entendait à merveille, quand l'ébéniste était mort sans crier gare au chagrin du jeune garçon" (*ESB* 13). Éléazar was destined, as his mother said, to another path, that of a shepherd. Later when Éléazar becomes a pastor, he reflects on how much his previous vocation as a shepherd had prepared him for this role.[32]

The second significant childhood memory for Éléazar is that of being brutally beaten by his master, Hezlett (*ESB* 16). The incident reads like a scene from a movie:

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[31] Tournier explicates the need to heal from childhood pain in *Le Vent Paraclet,* when he speaks of his tonsillotomy. He explains: "L'enfance nous est donnée comme un chaos brûlant, et nous n'avons pas trop de tout le reste de notre vie pour tenter de le mettre en ordre et de nous l'expliquer" (19).

[32] In terms of vocation Éléazar fulfills the role of 'pasteur' which in French has the double meaning of being a priest and a shepherd.

> Il posa à terre le bélier blessé, se releva et attendit. Sans un mot, Hezlett déploya le fouet et commença à frapper l'adolescent. Il le frappa longtemps à grands coups sifflants qui l'enveloppaient de la tête aux pieds. Quand il s'arrêta enfin, Éléazar n'avait plus figure humaine. (*ESB* 16)

The severity of the violence is heightened here because it is preceded by an act of tenderness and mercy on the part of Éléazar, who has rescued a sheep that has gone astray. In fact, the scene where Éléazar leaves the flock in search of the one who is lost, echoes the New Testament parable of the Lost Sheep (Matt 18:12-14), wherein the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine still in the flock in order to search for the one lost sheep. This act of love is compared to Éléazar's heroic and compassionate act, an act that is tragically rewarded with violence and cruelty. Here Éléazar is further paralleled to Jesus, who calls himself the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11,14) by being beaten and crucified.

Both Tournier and his protagonist Éléazar share two similar and formative childhood experiences. While Tournier asserts that he maintains authorial distance and that his personal life does not come into play in his novels, the echo of the author's personal life cannot be missed (Payot 32-40; Brusnel, *Tournier*).[33] First, both Tournier and Éléazar's dream to become cabinetmakers was not fulfilled.[34] Second, they both had a marked experience of physical torture as children (*VP* 20). For Tournier it was the violent tonsillotomy[35] at the age of four, an incident so significant that he has

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[33] In an interview with Brusnel Tournier reinforces that his personal life does not influence his novels. He states: "Moi, je n'ai aucun besoin de m'exprimer Et dans mes romans, je n'exprime pas du Tournier, je fais du roman" (Brusnel, *Tournier*).

[34] Tournier's dream of becoming a cabinetmaker predates even his well-known dream of becoming a teacher. Interestingly enough, both of these dreams were thwarted.

[35] A tonsillotomy is distinguished from a tonsillectomy. In the former, the tonsils are violently pulled out while in the latter, they are surgically removed.

branded it, "L'Agression, L'Attentat" (*VP* 17). For Éléazar it was the experience of being brutally beaten by his master Hezlett.

It is precisely this experience of violence that denotes Éléazar's transition from the innocence of childhood into the brutal world of adulthood – an event that marks him. In fact the scar on his right cheek still reddens when he experiences any anger (*ESB* 16). The narrator comments: "De ce jour, il conserva une balafre sur la joue droite. Presque invisible en temps ordinaire, elle rougissait sous le coup de toute émotion. Mais ce n'était rien en comparaison de la blessure jamais cicatrisée qu'il garda à l'âme" (*ESB* 16). Tournier, in his semi-autobiographical piece, *Le Vent Paraclet,* writes of his tonsil removal: "Je fus littéralement noyé dans mon propre sang" (18). For both Tournier and Éléazar the rite of passage is bloody. Other examples of childhood suffering are not difficult to detect in the Tournier corpus (for example, *Le Fugue du Petit Poucet* [1979], *Les Météores* [1975], or *La Goutte d'Or* [1985]). In the novel *Les Météores,* the protagonist must "go through bloody subterranean rites of passage" (Baroche 52). These experiences of painful, sometimes bloody childhood wounds, can be interpreted as rites of passage.[36]

The healing search for Tournier's lost tonsils in *Éléazar,* has substantial evidence and presents a valid reading. Yet Colin Davis cautions that Tournier's famous tonsillotomy, while being rooted in his childhood, is "disconcertingly similar to an event described in Michel Leiris's *L'Age de l'homme*" (Worton, *Tournier* 163). This realization introduces an element of suspicion and may undermine this reading.

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[36] Tournier explains: "Brûlures, morsures, mutilations, arrachage de dents, la liste des supplices infligés à l'enfant dans les sociétés dites primitives, comme prix de statut d'homme à part entière, est inépuisable" (*VP* 19).

4. Out of Bounds: Seeking the Margins

Éléazar is continually at odds with the majority culture. First of all, he is a Protestant within a predominantly Catholic Ireland (*ESB* 19). Even when he attends a Protestant seminary, he is ridiculed for having been a shepherd and his lack of wealth estranges him from his wealthy colleagues. When he re-emerges into the community of Galway as an acolyte, he is socially marginalized because of his pastoral vocation; however, this position does afford him some privileges (*ESB* 18). For example, he is invited to attend a Spring ball but is unable to participate because of his clerical position (*ESB* 25). Later, when he wants to visit Esther, he easily gains an interview with her parents because of his position, yet he is marginalized by, and even ridiculed for, his choice of Esther as a bride (*ESB* 29, 34-36). His marriage to Esther – a Catholic and a cripple – furthers his identity as someone who functions outside of the norms of society. Yet we would argue that it is the very marginality of Éléazar and Esther that allows a marriage which is a symbolic and prophetic reconciliation of warring Ireland.

Éléazar's life and decisions continue to reinforce a marginalized identity. Namely, when Éléazar commits the murder of the master of a young shepherd boy, the act further defines him as an outsider, now a criminal on the fringes of society (*ESB* 44-45). Again when he reaches America he continues to be at odds with the *status quo*. On the eve of the first Sunday, Éléazar chooses to keep the Sabbath and not to follow the crowd who continue on their journey (*ESB* 76-77). Once again Éléazar elects to part from the community and venture into the barren desert alone.

In an interview with Michael Worton, Tournier comments on his preference for 'marginal' protagonists in his novels (*Tournier* 194). One could draw a theory or theology of marginality from Tournier's perpetual celebration of marginality.[37] This theoretical framework, or theology of the margins, has roots in the Biblical narrative, where heroes of the faith are often called upon to make decisions which push them to the periphery of society or to identify with those on the periphery.[38] The Biblical theme of marginality fits an established group of Tournier's 'marginal' protagonists, which include Alexandre, Abel Tiffauges, and the Fetishist, to name a few.[39] As Worton reminds us, Tournier contrasts the 'normal' person with the 'marginal' person:

> Those people who are known as 'normal' offer us a terrifying spectacle of crimes of passion, suicides, abortions, child abuse, both sexual and emotional, etc. It is striking that those who are seen as 'marginal' (homosexuals, fetishists, solitary intellectuals, artists, etc.) generally present a much less tragic scenario. Why is this? The weakness of 'normal' people is to believe from their earliest childhood that they 'conform' to the established order of the day and that therefore everything will be given freely to them. So when contradictions and problems occur, they will have no defense, no means of surmounting difficulties. The 'marginal' being…knows from the very start that he will have to construct his life in a hostile environment. He is better armed, better prepared for every struggle. (*Tournier* 194)

On the one hand, the 'normal' person does not possess the ability or framework with which to overcome contradictions. On the other hand, since those 'out of bounds' are not part of the status quo, they are able to identify problems to which those 'on the inside' have become blind. They also have had to struggle for their existence and

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[37] Mairi Maclean also notes that "marginal individuals are brought to centre stage. The disadvanged are preferred" in Tournier's writings (13).

[38] The Israelites were to care for the widows, orphans and aliens because they were also foreigners in Egypt (Exodus 22:21). Jesus spent his time with those on the margins of society – lepers, the blind, the lame, the deaf, prostitutes, tax collectors, and children; these were the ones who were rejected in society (Matt 15:30). Those on the periphery of society were also open to see and to receive from God. At the end of his life Jesus was crucified outside the city as a criminal with bandits.

[39] Alexandre (*Les Météores* [1975]), Abel Tiffauges (*Le Roi des Aulnes* [1970]) and the Fetishist (*Le Coq de Bruyère* [1978]).

livelihood and therefore may have the skills necessary to resolve many of life's complex problems. The exaltation of the normal is found in the traditional depiction of heroes; however, Tournier inverts this view with his portrayal of a 'less than perfect' role model such as Éléazar.

While the search for a marginal hero is present in the novella, it is likely not the central thrust of the entire work and resurfaces in other searches, such as the Moses/Éléazar parallelism.

5. Child Find: Searching for *L'enfant inspiré*

The theme of the child resurfaces in many of Tournier's works and therefore, justifies our search for the child in *Éléazar*.[40] The search is short with the child introduced from the first line of the *conte*: "L'enfant pasteur voyait déferler..." (11). We have already noted the portrayal of the suffering child above.

The most significant portrayal of the child is made through the young Coralie, Éléazar's daughter. Cora is depicted as both innocent and angelic in *Éléazar*. With her clear blue eyes, Cora resembles angels from Renaissance art (*ESB* 76; Bouloumié, *Inspiré* 132). The parallelism between children and angels is made even more explicit in the text through the comment on the theological view of angels in the Middle Ages: "[I]ls ne sont ni homme, ni femme, et ignorent la procréation. Cela les rapproche des enfants et ne faut-il pas admettre que seuls les enfants en raison de leur faiblesse et de leur innocence ont le privilège de posséder un ange gardien?" (*ESB* 31).

Despite the arguments in favour of children as angelic ("qu'ils fussent tous des petits anges de pureté tombés du ciel" [*ESB* 30]), Esther challenges this perspective by

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[40] See Bouloumié, *Tournier* 220–231; Tournier, "L'enfant coiffé" in *Le Vent Paraclet* (1977) and "Émile, Gavroche, Tarzan" in *Le Vol du Vampire* (1981).

claiming that children are as perverse as adults except that the manifestations of their perversity are more age appropriate (*ESB* 30).

Many of Tournier's works, such as *Amandine ou les deux jardins* (1978), *Le Fugue du Petit Poucet* (1979), *La couleuvrine* (1994), feature child-protagonists. While the young girl Coralie, Éléazar's daughter, is not the protagonist of the novella, she plays an integral role in the narrative. Readers are struck by the mysterious, insightful, and almost prophetic qualities of the young Cora, and are constantly confronted with the ingenuity and the impertinence of her exclamations. For example, Cora remarks: "Le nez de Cléopâtre, s'il eût été plus court, toute la face de la terre aurait changé" quoting the famous maxim by Blaise Pascal (*ESB* 40).[41] In another instance, when her father, Éléazar, is teaching the catechism about the Eucharist, Cora asks: "Les disciples ont bu le sang et mangé la chair de Jésus, mais Jésus lui-même a-t-il bu son propre sang et mangé sa propre chair?" (*ESB* 41).[42] The narrator comments: " Éléazar avait été confondu par l'impertinence de cette question" (*ESB* 41). The text often underscores her peculiarities: "Coralie observait avec une attention vigilante et laissait échapper de brefs commentaires toujours surprenants" (*ESB* 53). Coralie, more so than her brother Benjamin, communicates Tournier's fascination with the wonder of the child's mind. As the narrator says: "[M]ais comment savoir ce qui se passait dans la petite tête vigilante de Cora?" (*ESB* 54). These are just a few examples of the insight and ingenuity of the young Coralie and likely of Tournier's narrative voice.

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[41] In the *Pensées*, Pascal remarks, "Le nez de Cléopâtre, s'il eût été plus court, toute la face de la terre aurait changé."

[42] It is interesting to note that this precise question is posed by Tournier in *Le Vagabond Immobile* (1984), where he writes: "Évangiles. Un point capital qui n'a pas été élucidé: lors de la Cène, Jésus boit-il lui aussi son propre sang, mange-t-il sa propre chair? (43).

Cora's prophetic insights are revealed repeatedly throughout the narrative. It is Cora who exclaims "mon beau navire" (*ESB* 52) when she realizes that *The Hope* is identical to the ship she had been sketching for several days. While aboard the ship, it is again Cora who discovers the sick below in the hold (*ESB* 58). In the New World, when Éléazar wanted to remove the arrow from the wagon, Coralie wisely warns Éléazar to leave the arrow. She recognizes the mystical significance of the arrow. As Bouloumié has convincingly argued: "Cora semble un enfant inspiré" (*Inspiré* 132). She falls within the tradition of the myth of the divine child.

Cora's divine attributes are further reinforced through parallels with Jesus. The scene where Cora disappears in the crowd (*ESB* 55) echoes the story of the young Jesus who is separated from his family in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-52). She also resembles Christ as she extends compassion and care to the sick on the ocean voyage to the United States: "Esther ne put empêcher Cora de descendre avec elle dans ce lieu d'agonie pour y donner le peu de soins qu'il était possible d'apporter aux maladies" (*ESB* 58). While there are a few parallels that can be drawn with the Christ figure or even a prophetic figure, Cora seems to present a more laic viewpoint, or a presence that supports the intuition of children. As Hermansen remarks : "[P]ar ce rôle elle s'associe avec les prophètes, mais ses révélations ne viennent pas de Dieu, car elles sortent de son intuition d'enfant et de ses observations des faits et du comportement humain. Elle mêle une dissonance de laïcité dans la tonalité chrétienne pure du livre." (28) Viewed in this light, Coralie's character unsettles the sacred substructure of the novella and introduces a profane dimension. This being said, one must also entertain the possibility that Cora complements the Christian tone of the book. One can argue

that Cora represents the ideal Christian as one who meets the requirements of having a childlike faith. As Jesus explains to his followers, they must become like a child in order to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:15-17).

Even though Coralie is not the protagonist of *Éléazar*, she nonetheless commands a significant place in the cast of characters, possessing an unexpectedly strong voice. In Coralie can easily be identified Tournier's *enfant inspiré*.

6. Lessons and Facts: Discovering Tournier's Educational Philosophy

Tournier's instructive mode consistently appears as a dominant feature in *Éléazar*. Along the educational trail we encounter facts, trivia and many historical figures that enrich our readerly knowledge bank.

It should be mentioned that Tournier has sometimes been criticized as being overly didactic in some of his novels. In the words of American critic Roger Shattuck: "Tournier is an incorrigible pedagogue and, having decided not to innovate or experiment with the traditional form of the novel and to maintain the advantages of clear language, falls occasionally into excessive didacticism" (Shattuck 262). The case of *Éléazar* would be no exception to Shattuck's remarks. Some accuse the text of being non-aesthetically pleasing because of its emphasis on educating the reader with its myriad references. Indeed, very few of the references to historical figures or events are inserted without an explanatory note (e.g. the legend of Saint Patrick [*ESB* 18-19], the Irish potato famine of 1845 [*ESB* 47]). Despite the fact that Tournier uses the novella to "teach," we would not accuse Tournier of utilitarianism.

As a pedagogue, Tournier clearly functions as a disseminator of knowledge in his novella. This more traditional form of didacticism is also communicated through

his main protagonist, Éléazar. Platten explains: "Éléazar embodies a didactic tradition of teaching and learning which is rooted from a Christian perspective in the Old Testament, and from a Judaic perspective in the Torah" (204). For example, Éléazar learns by rote and narrowly applies the teachings of the Old Testament to his life.

One of the primary lessons that the pedagogue Tournier seeks to 'teach' through the novella is his concept of the desert. Platten confirms that "with *Éléazar,* Tournier has turned proselytiser; the pedagogic novelist has pulled on his hair-shirt and set off, in pursuit of an aesthetic of the ascetic" (204). Platten compares Tournier's message to that of John the Baptist – who lives in the wilderness and encourages people to turn to the "way of the desert," a life of ascetic simplicity. Tournier's narrator proceeds with great vigour both in explaining the story of Éléazar in relation to Moses and in directing the interpretation toward the importance of the desert (namely, the desert as the milieu of intimacy with God). This is but one example of the myriad "lessons" that Tournier attempts to teach.

Yet teaching and learning for Tournier are not limited to the acquisition of mere knowledge and facts. His use of intertextual references fosters inquiry and discovery on the part of the reader. Tournier also encourages imitation and example by incorporating archetypes such as Moses. Finally, initiation, by which the reader is invited into a transformational experience, reflects Tournier's commitment to the educative function of the novella.

7. The Passage: Tracing Éléazar's Initiatory Journey

In many ways, *Éléazar* can be viewed as a *conte initiatique* since the narrative virtually traces the protagonist Éléazar from childhood to death through many trials and lessons. The seven features of the initiatic narrative described by Gascoigne will be considered in light of *Éléazar* in the following table (168-182).

Table 3.2 The seven features of the initiatic narrative in *Éléazar*

Seven features of the initiatic narrative (Gascoigne 168-182)	**Éléazar's initiatory journey**
1) Journey	Journey from Ireland to America across sea, desert and mountains
2) The mentor	The Serpent d'Airain and Coralie
3) Bereavement *A rupture with the profane, isolation, entering the 'realm of death'*	Feeling marginalized in general as a Protestant clergyman. He is isolated and grief-stricken by his crime.
4) Symbolic Death and rebirth	His journey aboard *The Hope* as a passage from death to life.
5) Sacrifice and mutilation of the body	Early in the novella, Éléazar's body is scarred from being beaten. On the journey, however, it is his son Benjamin who is nearly sacrificed because he is bitten by a snake.
6) Fertility *Not in terms of procreation rather as a form of fertile existence as a mediator between heaven and earth*	Éléazar in the shadow of Moses fulfills the role of a mediator between the sacred and profane, between *la source* et *le buisson,* between his family and his God.
7) Incorporation and spiritualization of the Beloved *The loss of the mentor through death*	No distinct parallel. Éléazar if interpreted as the mentor for the reader dies on the brink of the Promised land.

Éléazar's journey from Ireland to the "new world" is in the tradition of *voyages initiatiques* or *contes initiatiques*. Éléazar travels from his homeland through exile to the frontier of the Promised Land. His voyage begins as an attempt to escape. First we find that Éléazar is not truly at home in Ireland, but what truly motivates his departure is the fear of being caught for accidentally killing a man. As the narrator comments: "Partir était au total plus facile que rester" (*ESB* 48). Similarly it is this same kind of

desire to escape that motivates the three kings in *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar.* They each embark on a journey in order to escape from their respective realities (Cloonan, *History* 153).

The forty-day ocean crossing aboard *The Hope* from Ireland to the southern United States resounds with Biblical significance. The symbolic number forty appears over and over again in the Bible. In the story of Noah it rained for forty days and nights (Gen 7:4). Moreover, Moses and the Israelites were in the desert for forty years and Jesus fasted for forty days and nights before being tempted by Satan (Num 14: 34; Matt 4:2). The narrator comments on this parallel in the text: "Ce chiffre de quarante frappa Éléazar. Il eut pour la première fois la révélation que son destin personnel pouvait l'aider à écarter le rideau qui lui rendait la Bible si souvent incompréhensible." (*ESB* 56). The forty-day journey further convinces Éléazar that he is following in the footsteps of Moses (*ESB* 57).[43]

The low point of Éléazar's voyage aboard *The Hope* is likened to a descent into hell. He views the antechamber in the lower deck as the doorway to death. Éléazar's journey aboard *The Hope*, much like the trip on the ship the "Whitebird" in *Vendredi*, helps to reinforce the intersection between the metaphysical and the physical in the novel. In Greek mythology it is the ship that takes people from the physical world to the underworld or *Hades.* The narrator also notes the parallel between the vastness of the ocean and of eternity. The journey for Éléazar with his fellow dying passengers is as much a physical journey as it is a spiritual journey. Éléazar is said to have a

[43] In many ways, Éléazar again follows Éliade's example of religious man who imitates the initiation rites of the gods, heroes or ancestors found in myth, and in so doing, truly becomes a man (*Sacred* 100).

revelation and undergo a rite of passage[44] while on *The Hope* which ultimately changes his focus from the penance of his crime to the challenge of the future and the journey ahead. Bouloumié writes that Tournier "renoue avec une longue tradition mythique où le héros plonge, au cours d'un voyage initiatique, dans les ténèbres de la mort, pour en surgir autre, égal aux dieux" (*Roman* 155).

Éléazar must cross the prairies, travel the desert and pass through the mountain to arrive at his final destination in California. The initiatic journey proves to be a dangerous and arduous task. The entrance into the Colorado Desert is marked by Benjamin being bitten by a serpent – an experience that Éléazar interprets as an act of initiation (*ESB* 82-84). It is in the desert where Éléazar experiences a sense of returning "home" through closeness with God. Here he comes to an understanding of himself and is freed from the guilt of the murder he had committed back in Ireland. The desert is also the setting where Moses is torn between the people of God and Yahweh. Éléazar struggles between the burning bush that brings him into the presence of God and the water for which Moses had to strike the rock with his rod in order to appease the complaining Israelites.

Tournier, in an interview, has commented on the importance of the desert in Éléazar's journey:

> Comment comprendre Moïse? En faisant comme lui, en traversant le désert. Si vous restez en Irlande, vous ne comprendrez rien à la Bible. Les gens qui vivent dans la verdure, la pluie, les sources, l'eau, les marais et la tourbe, sont aux antipodes de la Bible. La Bible est un livre de désert, de sable. (Payot 32-40)

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[44] According to Éliade, a rite of passage is an "initiation into a sacred level of existence" (*Sacred* 62-113).

It is also in the desert where Éléazar encounters a mentor figure. Gascoigne comments that "the initiatic quest will generally offer the neophyte encounters with mentors, from whom he can gather wisdom" (171). For Éléazar, it is primarily the Serpent d'Airain who fulfils the role of mentor and imparter of wisdom. Through the figure of the Serpent d'Airain, Tournier is able to function as a mentor to both Éléazar and to the reader.

However, we would also contend that Coralie, too, functions as a mentor to her father. In *Éléazar* Tournier suggests that children, even though younger and less experienced, can function as a sort of mentor or instructor for their parents by helping them to relearn the fundamentals in life. He writes:

> [L]'une des vertus primordiales des enfants, c'est de ramener leurs parents par la force de l'éducation aux principes élémentaires de leur culture. Ce sont les premiers mots prononcés, l'alphabet ensuite, puis l'histoire, la géographie et surtout la religion. Grâce à Benjamin et Coralie, Éléazar avait le sentiment de reprendre–avec un regard mûr et critique–son propre apprentissage de la vie et de la vérité. (*ESB* 38)

Coralie and the Serpent d'Airain serve as mentors yet neither of them die. Thus, the feature of the loss of the mentor through death is lacking from this narrative. This being said, Éléazar understood as a mentor to the reader, can nevertheless, fulfill this role.

For Éléazar this journey ends in death. Whether this death is replete with significance or not is subject to debate. It could be seen as unnecessary, brought about by a foolish desire to over-identify with the figure of Moses. What purpose is there really for Éléazar to abandon the group and lead his family alone across the desert? Éliade acknowledges that the religious man, when imitating the gods and heroes, will allow himself even to be led to "acts that verged on madness, depravity, and crime"

(*Sacred* 104). Furthermore, it is in the desert where Éléazar's soul is finally at rest, where he is freed from the anxiety and torment of his sin, where he is liberated from self-doubt, where his faith is made complete, and where he is reconciled to his God. Tournier underscores Éléazar's final resting place in the desert, a place that he deems as sacred, where intimacy with God is possible. Not entering into California represents a separation from the profane. Éléazar moves from a haphazard dependence on God to a full surrender. He also grasps a deep understanding of the Scriptures and his own identification within the Biblical meta-narrative. Éléazar, the *hasard*, is now Éléazar, the one helped by God.

Éléazar's journey is similar to the fugues of other Tournier protagonists like Amandine, le Petit Poucet, and Colombine,[45] who all venture from the world of the child to the world of the adult and return transformed. As Nancy Easterlin writes: "Tom Thumb and Amadine focus on children's efforts to form suitable responses as they discover aspects of their own sexuality or psychology against the conflicting or indifferent, or imponderable restrictions of the adult world" (151). When Idriss, the protagonist of *La Goutte d'Or,* embarks on his initiatory journey across the Sahara desert in search of his photograph, he is essentially searching for his soul. He only finds peace "when he rediscovers the innocence of the sign in the work of the calligrapher" (Baroche 55). All of these journeys have been said to be a structural principle in Tournier's works (Gascoigne 170). Tournier's use of the initiatory journey of the protagonist Éléazar, therefore, provides another model for initiation in society that has largely lost its rites of passage.

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[45] *Amandine et les deux jardins, La Fugue du Petit Poucet,* and *Pierrot et les secrèts de la nuit* are the respective sources of these protagonists.

Each of the seven trails discussed above are well-marked and provide a creative discovery, yet they are neither independent nor unrelated. They sometimes intersect one with another and although the careful reader or critic may be able to derive partial insights into the text by following the various paths, interpretation will always remain limited. Klettke remarks:

> Le problème fondamental de la critique tourniérienne, c'est le thème de la quête du sens lié à la question du message. L'absence d'un sens univoque dissémine diamétralement dans toutes les directions la critique tendue entre liberté et contrainte. Vacillant entre l'impuissance et le désir ardent de révéler un secret inhérent au texte, les chercheurs se retrouvent singulièrement en grand nombre chez l'auteur lui-même, pour en revenir en se rendant compte avec frustration que leur interview ne les a pas délivrés de leurs 'supplices.' (*Préface* 12)

Many readers find *Éléazar* unsettling and irritating because they are unable to read in their habitual manner. They are frustrated by a reading process that is disruptive because they encounter 'road blocks' or are unable to arrive at an agreed conclusion. Colin Davis remarks that "Tournier's texts engage the reader in a quest for understanding, but never arrive at a fully intelligible conclusion" (8). This is what he labels elsewhere as "the frustrated promise of intelligibility" in Tournier (Davis 93). Likewise, Gascoigne writes that the "fascination of Tournier's oeuvre may derive precisely from the sense in which it seems at once to promise and withhold a unitary pattern of meaning" (204). While there may not be one unitary theme that gathers together the meaning in Éléazar, the work is not without meaning and even the process of following the various interpretive paths, we would argue, is enlightening and beneficial rather than frustrating and futile.

Chapter IV Game Strategy

Tournier the Master Game-Player

Our preferred designation for Tournier is that of a master game-player. Tournier's use of the ludic recalls the Latin verb, *ludere,* a verb that connotes a gratuitous diversion and an intellectual activity that is not frivolous. Hence, there is a didactic element even in the ludic. The classification of a game player is not mutually exclusive of the ambivalent and contradictory descriptors of Tournier as a philosopher, educator, ironist, children's writer, adult writer, mocker of critics, Christian and cynic. Whether Tournier fits all or none of these roles is debatable, but what remains unquestioned is his propensity for the ambiguous and the paradoxical. He disagrees with the hermeneutical practice of looking to the author as the 'key' or answer to interpretation and toys with the traditional role of the author (one who guides the reader to discover what is important) through a sophisticated strategy.

Like a skilled player of hide-and-go-seek, Tournier searches via his narrative strategy for creative and new places or ways to hide. By shifting the normal boundaries of the game, Tournier as 'hider' can tease or lure the 'seekers' to move beyond their habitual patterns and lead them to new vistas. However, he also creates a somewhat uneven playing field. Instead of hiding inside a box or behind a tree or underneath a table, the 'hider' may choose different disguises or masks. This element of surprise and originality is essential for the game to remain interesting. In hide-and-go-seek one innovative permutation on the part of the 'hider' is never to remain in one place, but to continually move around. Such a modification changes the rules and teases players. Thus, a clever 'hider' may put false clues into play that will lead the "seekers" to

explore down an empty trail. In terms of the narrative, the presence of these 'false' textual markers or clues can be understood as ironic formalizations.

The following section will explore some of strategies Tournier uses as a master-game player juggling with myths and narratives: ridicule through the *rire blanc*, probing interest through the game of question and answer (Q&A), and inversion of expectations through the game of opposites.

The *Rire Blanc*

One of the primary ludic techniques used by Tournier is the *rire blanc,* otherwise known as *humour blanc* or *le rire de Dieu*. In *Le Vent Paraclet,* Tournier uses a popular French joke to illustrate his concept of the *rire blanc*. The joke reads as follows:

> Deux hommes, un Blanc et un Indien, traversent les Montagnes Rocheuses. Il fait très froid. Le Blanc est emmitouflé dans des fourrures. L'Indien est nu. Tu n'as pas froid? – Et toi, tu n'as pas froid au visage? – Non. – Moi visage partout. (*VP* 201)

On one level, the joke takes the Indian's nakedness to the absurd. If the White Man's face is fine, then the Indian, according to the logic, because he is not cold, is all face. On another level, there is a play on the notion of *blanc.* The Indian in his nakedness, and not the White man, exposes an absolute *blanc*. In *Éléazar* we find an echo of this joke with the interaction between Éléazar (who is covered in clothing yet his face is not cold) and the Indian chief – the Serpent d'Airain—who is naked. and not cold. The chief claims, "[J]e suis visage partout" (*ESB* 92).

The word *blanc* evokes the absence of visible colour and suggests a complete emptiness or void. However, *blanc* is also a color associated with the innocence and purity of childhood. It is the delicate balance of these two

descriptions that contributes to Tournier's *rire blanc*. To better understand this concept we must explore two key points: the sociological context of Tournier's writing, and Tournier's definition of un 'comique cosmique.'

Tournier's corpus is situated within the sociological climate of Nietzsche, who heralds the death of God, and of Foucault, who champions the death of the author. In a very general sense, we could say that the death of both God and author go hand in hand and testify to a reality void of absolutes. The *rire blanc* comes from the perspective of someone standing outside a situation and laughing at its utter meaninglessness. As we have said, being confronted with a *blanc* evokes images of nothingness and of an infinite and absolute emptiness. On a philosophical level, it is the realization that nothing is important, or, in Tournier's words: "Il sait tout à coup que rien n'a aucune importance" (*VP* 199). Essentially man lives in a brief moment between two voids and any meaning ascribed to his life is the mere invention of human beings. The profound realization of life's utter meaninglessness at some point goes beyond the "tragic" and becomes "comic". It is like the boy in "The Emperor's New Clothes" who laughs when he realizes that the emperor is wearing nothing.

Klettke explains the reading process and the *rire blanc* as follows:

> [Le] lecteur qui entre dans le jeu découvre les nombreuses enveloppes (et masques) du spectacle tragi-comique – la parodie, la satire, l'ironie et le blasphème. Plus il pénètre dans les profondeurs du texte, plus il se voit confronté à un *blanc*. Il lui importe de lever de nombreuses couches pour détecter d'un point de vue supérieur l'âme de l'auteur où se cristallise la force motrice de la création. (*L'art* 146)

In many ways, Klettke's conception of the reading process fits our metaphor of the game of hide-and-go-seek, where the reader is continually searching for clues and meaning. However, Klettke suggests that the searches or trails reveal nothing and are

utterly meaningless. In Klettke's view Tournier places signs and names in his texts only to lead readers astray (*Préface* 10). She claims that Tournier removes the anchor from the Moses narrative and replaces it with the ephemeral image of the Zarathustra dancer. In other words, when Tournier rewrites the narrative, he creates a text that is lacking the foundational stability associated with myth and inserts a text that is essentially fleeting. He does this by an overlay of irony. Though the narrative appears to be religious, Klettke warns that it is merely a disguise and that below the polished surface lies a text that is fleeting. Tournier moves toward the auto-dissolution, or in other words, deconstruction, of the text, ultimately found in *Éléazar*.

Klettke argues that Tourier, like a skilled player of hide-and-go-seek, places false textual markers such as the names of characters, or the references to water, to mislead readers. It is a radical and macabre permutation of the game to suggest that there is no one hiding and that there is no meaning in the text.

When discussing different types of comedy, Tournier distinguishes among traditional *humour rose* that is light-hearted and playful, *humour noir* with its macabre preoccupation with death, and *humour blanc* with its metaphysical or cosmic dimension (*VP* 198). He adds: "Mais il y a un comique cosmique: celui qui accompagne l'émergence de l'absolu au milieu du tissu de relativités où nous vivons. C'est le rire de Dieu." (*VP* 198) In this sense Tournier appears to unite the comic and cosmic. Where the comic extends across the horizontal plane, the cosmic is more vertical. We have found that most critics emphasize the vertical and cosmic dimension of the *rire blanc* (associated with mockery) while ignoring the comic dimension

(associated with the joyful and life-affirming laughter of the child). The delicate balance between the cosmic and comic must be maintained.

Gascoigne points to the child as "the chief source of this double remedy of humour and spirituality, 'le comique cosmique', 'le rire blanc' which Tournier sees as a characteristic of some of the philosophical writers he most reveres—Nietzsche, Valéry, Léon Bloy, Thomas Mann" (164). In *Éléazar* it is Cora who fulfills the role of the *enfant rieur* by mocking the rigid systems of adulthood. She reflects Tournier's view that humour has a subversive role in society. The lightness of the laughter of children overturns the serious and weighty nature of adulthood.[46] As Bouloumié states: "[L]organisation de l'adulte, ce monde rationnel, indispensable à son équilibre demeurait incomplet sans l'improvisation de l'enfant joueur" (*Inspiré* 133). However, Cora also reveals the cosmic dimension since it is through her voice (and not that of her father, the pastor) that Providence is expressed.

While the *rire blanc* is evident in *Éléazar,* we are hesitant to side with Klettke in declaring the work devoid of meaning or value. We support Tournier's reinterpretation of his use of the *rire blanc*: "Car si le rire blanc signale la fonction subversive et déstructrice de l'œuvre littéraire, il en est une autre, toute positive celle–ci, qui est de célébration" (Tournier *VP* 204). Tournier writes that there are essentially three forms of celebrations—philosophy, fiction, and poetry. He contrasts these three literary genres to the sciences. Tournier says that the sciences are always in the process of simplifying, reducing, and seeking efficiency whereas philosophy, fiction, and poetry

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[46] In *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique,* Vendredi laughs at the order and structure established by Robinson "Son enfance le pousse à rire insolemment de mes enseignements" (147) and again Vendredi's laughter is described as "un rire redoutable, un rire qui démasque et confond le sérieux menteur dont se parent le gouverneur et son île administrée"(149).

are always moving from the simple to the complex. Tournier explains the celebratory function of literature as follows: "[C]élébrant l'inépuisable richesse du réel et l'irremplaçable originalité des choses et des êtres – et créant du même coup cette richesse pour notre émerveillement" (*VP* 209). In this way, Tournier shifts the focus from the void to the celebratory and creational aspects of the literary enterprise. He emphasizes the light-hearted, the game, the sheer enjoyment and pleasure of literature.

Q & A

As a philosopher Tournier has always been driven by questions, and some critics even view each of his novels as answers to his questions (de Rambures 164). The game of question-and-answer is a favourite as well for children, who Tournier claims are his ideal readers. Like the philosopher, the child is motivated by natural curiosity and the desire to find answers to big and small questions alike. As Tournier notes:

> We pass from animals to nature, to ecology, to the quality of life, and then, quite simply, to happiness. Children are not afraid of the big questions. In fact they do not order problems hierarchically. What do you eat for breakfast? Or, how can one be happy? They throw out such questions without making any distinction. (*Writer* 187)

One of the favourite questions of children is "why?" and this same question also seems to permeate Tournier's texts. Martin Roberts argues in his book, *Michel Tournier: Bricolage and Cultural Mythology,* that Tournier twists myths and uses them to answer questions or to solve problems. He writes: "By articulating an abstract problem or contradiction through a concrete narrative, it becomes possible to play out a symbolic solution to the contradiction, which in reality is insoluble" (Roberts *Bricolage* 15). For example, the three kings in *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar* incarnate contradictions. The king Gaspard clearly enunciates his paradox: "Je suis

noir, mais je suis roi" (*GMB* 9). The contradiction here is between *négritude* and *blondeur* and is epitomized in the black king Gaspard's aversion to his own complexion. Melchior also expresses himself via a contradiction: "Je suis pauvre, mais je suis roi" (*GMB* 87). In this novel, contradictions are reconciled and order is achieved through the Christ-child. For Gaspard, resolution comes through the figure of Christ, who appears to him to be black, and for Melchior, it is the Christ-child being declared king even though born in the poverty and humbleness of a stable.

Elsewhere, Bouloumié comments on the fact that myths are essentially a form of parabolic writing, similar to the parables found in the Christian Gospels, and serve to resolve contradictions and provide answers to problems which science cannot resolve. She writes: "[L]e terme *écriture parabolique,* au sens qu'il a dans l'évangile, pourrait s'appliquer à l'écriture de Michel Tournier" (*Roman* 9).

Of course, the big question in *Éléazar* is why Moses was refused entry into the Promised Land. This question can also be viewed in terms of a paradox or a riddle to be solved. Moses, hailed as a hero by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, had the task of leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. His faith is renowned and exemplary and he shares a deep intimacy with God. It is Moses to whom God had spoken through the burning bush and to whom God was revealed on Mount Tabor. And yet, the end of his life is tainted by his failure to enter the long-awaited Promised Land all because of one sin, the sin of rebellion against the way of God. The book of Numbers explains the sin of Moses: "…when your [Moses'] community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you [Moses and his brother Aaron] disobeyed my

command to honour me as holy before their eyes" (27:14).Platten explains that Tournier is puzzled by this contradiction:

> Tournier takes issue with the usual theological explanation for Yahweh's refusal to allow Moses to go forth into the Promised Land, namely, that he was provoked by a lack of trust on Moses' part signified by the latter's striking of the tablet not once but twice in order to bring forth the spring waters. According to Tournier, this interpretation is the result of 'un immense malentendu.'(206)

In *Éléazar* Tournier clearly inserts a contradiction through the voice of the narrator : "Et surtout, surtout, pourquoi cette incompréhensible et inexorable interdiction dont le frappe Yahweh d'entrer à la tête de son people en cette Terre promise où coulent le lait et le mile?" (*ESB* 39)

We agree with Tournier that the question of Moses' refusal to enter the Promised Land is what propels the novella. Tournier invites the reader to reconsider again why Moses was refused entry into the Promised Land and how Moses became the leader of the people of Israel. In an interview, Tournier offers an answer to this question:

> C'est une histoire d'amour: Yahweh a décidé de le garder parce qu'il l'aime, c'est son prophète. Il veut se débarrasser des Hébreux qui ne pensent qu'à avoir de l'eau, des femmes et des enfants, et faire avec Moïse une grande race: 'Je ferai de toi une grande nation,' lui promet-il. Le pauvre Moïse, qui ne demandait pas cet excès d'honneur, est déchiré entre les Hébreux et Yahweh. C'est l'opposition du sacré et du profane. Voilà, j'attends qu'on m'apporte une meilleure interprétation. (Payot 32-40)

Even though Tournier's interpretation seems quite outlandish, we will argue later (under the heading, "Promised Land – Desert") that his interpretation is not entirely without Biblical precedent. However, we disagree with Tournier, who contends that the Moses narrative is essentially about the opposition of the sacred and the profane.

While it appears that the main purpose of the novella is to resolve this problem, one must always be cautious of taking Tournier's assertions at face value. The

exploration of this question is assuredly a major theme in the *conte*; however, a more careful reading may reveal other themes.

The Game of Opposites

Another interpretive grid that has been used to understand Tournier's writing is considering his texts as a series of binary oppositions.[47] The use of oppositions by Tournier is attractive to children, who love playing the game of opposites. Of course, the binary oppositions also communicate and call into question more profound philosophical concepts. The game of opposites for Tournier is sometimes sheer pleasure and sometimes an attempt to resolve a contradiction.

Many critics point to the fact that Michel Tournier attempts to deconstruct traditional binary oppositions, thereby undoing inequality. Kirsty Fergusson notes that "Tournier brings together such pairs of mutually opposed concepts or values in order to subject them to a succession of subversions and inversions" (*Metaphysical* 89).

Indeed inversion is one of Tournier's preferred literary techniques and one through which he creatively undoes common modes of thinking and common patterns of association. Fergusson points out that inversion should be considered in both dialectical and rhetorical terms (*Metaphysical* 89). His rhetorical use of inversion opens a dialogue on the inequality and the tension that exists between opposing pairs. Dialectically, Tournier attempts to resolve contradictions through rational discussion in his texts. And Tournier, a consummate ironist, uses both what has been termed,

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[47] In the work of Lévi-Strauss and others, myth is "a set of binary polar relationships, assertions, or implications" which are "progressively mediated through other concepts introduced intro the situation until a provisional or conditional resolution is achieved." In other words, discerning and following the binary oppositions in myths are crucial to the interpretation of the myth. (Vickery, "Myth Criticism" 810)

malign and benign inversion.[48] Redfern defines malign inversion as a "clever controlled often malicious twist" (313). On the other hand, benign inversion has a more beneficial and positive slant.

On a general level Tournier inverts our notion of the sacred by moving it from its traditional site within institutional religion to a new location within everyday objects and experiences. He recognizes the profound significance of daily events and renders them almost sacred, arguing that everything becomes sacred if perceived as a source of comfort, beauty, and joy (Cloonan 84). This inversion of the sacred and profane is of particular importance to our study since the opposition of water and fire can also be interpreted as the opposition between the sacred and the profane. One key example of the inversion of the profane is Tournier's treatment of the serpent (which we have already considered). In fact, Tournier views the entire Moses narrative and by extension Éléazar's story, as the tension between the sacred and the profane

In this section, we will consider several pairs of important binary oppositions and inversions present in *Éléazar:* Cain – Abel, nomad – sedentary, mountain – pit, black – white, Catholic – Protestant, adult – child(like), Providence – le hasard, and Promised Land – desert.[49]

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[48] Michael Worton defines inversion (malign and benign) as "A fundamental concept in Tournier's thinking, it is the moment in a system (an individual life, history, etc.) when, without any new element being introduced into the system, events suddenly and inexplicably acquire a new sense and direction, turning either to evil (malign inversion) or to goodness (benign inversion) (*Tournier* 204).

[49] There are many other binary oppositions present in the narrative, such as seduction and salvation, harm and healing, weightiness and lightness. These oppositions, however, will not be discussed in the present study.

Cain – Abel

The Cain – Abel rivalry is found time and again in Tournier. In *Le Roi des Aulnes* the protagonist Abel Tiffauges reflects on the origin of his name and the Cain – Abel opposition: "Abel était berger, Caïn était laboureur. Berger, c'est-à-dire nomade, laboureur, c'est-à-dire sédentaire. La querelle d'Abel et de Caïn se poursuit de génération en génération depuis l'origine des temps jusqu'à nos jours" (Tournier, *Le Roi des Aulnes* 40).

This opposition also appears in *Éléazar*. First, Éléazar's vocation as a shepherd places him within the mythic framework of the Cain and Abel opposition (Beaude 424). Second, Éléazar and his brother are compared to Cain and Abel and their respective vocations of laborer and shepherd (*ESB* 14). The narrator clarifies this opposition: "On aurait dit qu'il avait à cœur de perpétuer la tradition biblique qui dresse l'un contre l'autre, l'agriculteur sédentaire Caïn contre le Pasteur nomade Abel" (*ESB* 14). Third, Éléazar is further identified with Abel in his penchant for a nomadic lifestyle. While we find traces of the Cain – Abel opposition, it is difficult to determine its significance within Tournier's text. We would argue that detecting this opposition is merely a game.

Nomad – Sedentary

Tournier also uses his protagonist, Éléazar, to demonstrate the tension between the nomad and the sedentary. The O'Braid family's life in bucolic Ireland, which is sedentary, is set in contrast to their roaming life via horse and wagon in the United States, a life that reveals itself as being increasingly nomadic. That nomadic lifestyle is also shared by the Native Americans and the cowboys whom the O'Braid family

encounter in the Wild West. By the end of the story, as they enter California, they have been virtually stripped of all their belongings: their cart, two of their horses, and other possessions. Tournier comments on this particular opposition in an interview with Payot:

> Elle est fondamentale dans l'histoire humaine. Les nomades ont été pendant longtemps les seigneurs qui exploitaient les sédentaires. Avec la Révolution française, on assiste au triomphe des sédentaires sur les nomades. La victoire des immigrés irlandais sur les Indiens et sur les cow-boys et leurs troupeaux de vâches, grâce notamment à l'invention du fil de fer barbelé, témoigne de ce retournement. Le sédentaire finit toujours par gagner, même si ça prend des siècles. On ne peut plus vivre en nomade. (32-40)

Despite Tournier's response, the glorified death of Éléazar in the desert at least suggests the temporary triumph of the nomad over the sedentary. As history reveals itself though, European homesteaders eventually did establish roots in the land and become sedentary.[50] The tension between nomad and sedentary is typified in the character of José who leaves his life as a wandering bandit to join the settlers in California.

Tournier attempts to reconcile the classic opposition of nomad and sedentary by blending the two lifestyles. For example, the description of the Chinese family and its mysterious carriage that is magically transformed into a store once the journey has begun (*ESB* 76), is reminiscent of Arlequin's scaffold in *Pierrot ou les secrets de la nuit* (1980). Another example is the O'Braid family wagon, which, like a modern RV, seems to illustrate a sedentary-nomadic hybrid lifestyle.[51]

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[50] In so doing they stripped Native Americans of their land and their nomadic lifestyle.
[51] This hybrid sedentary nomad lifestyle has also been adopted by Tournier. He describes himself as a "vagabond immobile," at length in his book, *Le vagabond immobile* (1984).

Mountain – Pit

The forty days spent by Moses on the mountain are turned upside down by the forty days Éléazar spent in the lower decks of the ship. As the narrative expounds: "Pourtant il ne s'agissait pas de gravir une montagne sacrée, mais de s'enfoncer au contraire dans un bas–fond abject " (*ESB* 57). The profane ascended to apprehend the sacred when Moses met God on the mountain. Yet Éléazar meets his Maker through a downward movement. God is found in the bowels of the boat among the stench, the filth, the corpses of the dead. Finding God in the 'pit' places of life is consistent with the New Testament stories of Jesus who is close to the sick, the prostitutes and those in low places.

Black – White

It is Coralie who comments upon the population the family meets when they arrive in Virginia (*ESB* 62–63). Through her brief reflections Tournier is able to insert a commentary on racism and *négritude,* which is reminiscent of *Les Rois Mages* and which is another of Tournier's preoccupations. In the novels *Les Rois Mages* and *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar,* Tournier plays with the binary opposition of *négritude* and *blondeur* or, in simpler terms, of black and white. When the black king encounters the beautiful blond slave, he comes to hate his skin color; however, he finally accepts and rejoices in his *négritude* after finding the Christ child in the manger who appears to him as black. A parallel between the two stories can be made in the inversion played out between black and white.

More specifically, in both narratives, black is said to come before white. In *Éléazar,* Coralie suggests that the New World belonged first to the Black people. In

Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar, Tournier traces this back to the first human, Adam, who must have been black since he is formed from the earth (which is dark).

Cora's simple question, "Pourquoi y a-t-il aussi des Blancs dans le nouveau monde?" (*ESB* 63), after she has seen all the Blacks, launches a reflection on the presence of Whites in the New World. The setting in the New World where they disembark is *La Virginie* or Virginia. This name calls to mind the purity, uncharted territory, and nakedness of the land. There is also the symbolic association of the colour white with the word *virgin*. All of this heightens the Black and White opposition. Cora challenges the association of Virginia (and consequently the New World) as belonging to the White Man. Ironically, the state of Virginia is historically not recognized for its purity. It is tainted by slavery and the resulting tension between Blacks and Whites.

The Serpent d'Airain also criticizes the 'white man,' chastising the white man's abuse of the bison. Though they have a great hunting weapon—the rifle, their greed and pride led them to hunt the bison to near extinction and in so doing threatened the survival of the Indians. His criticism is poignant: "Le Visage pâle ne fait pas partie de la grande famille vivante. C'est le fléau de Dieu!" (*ESB* 107). Here again Tournier overturns the general view of the supremacy of the 'white man' who is often said to be chosen by God.

Catholic – Protestant

Ireland, a country long defined by civil war based on religious differences, is the example *par excellence* of the division between Catholic and Protestant. The setting of the novella immediately conjures up in the mind of the reader the fierce opposition between Catholic and Protestant. It is an ideal setting in which to explore this binary opposition.

In the first part of the novella, the polarization between Protestant and Catholic is paramount. With the protagonist as a Protestant in Catholic Ireland, the narrative opens with this tension in place. In seminary his fellow classmates use a derogatory term to refer to Catholics, namely "catholiques attardés" (*ESB 18).* After completing his training, Éléazar serves as an acolyte or in other words an assistant to the pastor in a community that again epitomizes this opposition: "[L]a petite communauté protestante et anglophone vivait repliée sur elle–même dans cette cité agressivement catholique où tout le monde parlait gaélique" (*ESB* 22).

The reconciliation between these opposing pairs does not simply end at that level. Stereotypical Catholic and Protestant practices are also being both opposed and inverted throughout the novella. Tournier twists and inverts theological views of each denomination. In fact he undermines two distinguishing features of the Catholic faith: the rituals and the physical church through the voice of Esther. She explains: "La foi est affaire de cœur et non de gestes extérieurs…Et puis…l'Ireland est là humide et verte, et c'est pour moi la plus belle et la plus vivante des églises" (*ESB* 37). While Protestants do not limit the presence of God to the sacrament of the church, Catholics emphasize the significance of the church building. Through Catholic Esther these

stereotypes are broken down (*ESB* 37). Furthermore, since Esther is less concerned with the ceremonial perfection emphasized in the Catholic church, her faith has been described as more "personal" (Luk 159). Esther may also reveal Tournier's affinity for a mystic Catholicism.

Tournier tries to resolve this opposition by marrying the Protestant pastor Éléazar to a Catholic wife, Esther. In marrying Esther, Éléazar becomes what Tournier describes as " un homme hybride, une sorte de métis religieux " (*ESB* 37). The marriage challenges the *status quo* as the text explicates: "C'est que pour cette famille catholique, marier leur fille à un protestant, Pasteur de surcroît, c'était défier toute la société du comté de Galway." (*ESB* 36)

In the end, however, Éléazar seems to incorporate a new form of spirituality or religion that is not limited to Catholic or Protestant when he receives wisdom from the Indian chief. It is here where he truly becomes "un métis religieux."

Adult – Child(like)

From the very onset of the novella Tournier contrasts the adult and the child/childlike. The distinction is made according to the state of mind and not age. Tournier writes: "Seul l'adulte, solidement enraciné dans la terre vivante, redoute l'arrachement d'une mort inattendue et injuste. L'enfant et le vieillard flottent sans attaches à la surface de l'existence, et la quittent sans souffrance" (*ESB* 11). The adult for Tournier is more rooted, more attached to things and objects of this world, while the child and elderly person (who is childlike) are free from such distractions. For example, at the end of the story, Éléazar is free from the fear of death and has once again become like a child.

In *Éléazar,* Coralie's character and actions are repeatedly juxtaposed to those of her father and we witness the triumph of the child over the adult.[52] It is Cora who convinces her father not to remove the arrow that pierces the side of the carriage: "[C]'est une bonne flèche" (*ESB* 96). Later, when the family is suddenly surrounded by a band of Indians, her father can only grab his rifle in fear, and Coralie fearlessly approaches the Indian chief and points to the arrow. To the astonishment of everyone, the chief acknowledges her discovery and instead of killing her family, places the O'Braid clan under his protection. Through the opposition between adult and child Tournier attacks the conventional view that children lack wisdom and have no place in "the adult world," especially in the presence of conflict and decision-making.

Providence – Le hasard

Traditionally, Providence and chance are set in opposition. The opposite of chance is Providence, the belief that everything has a purpose and is organized, or pre-ordained, by God. In chance, there is no meaning attached to life's events; things just happen. Providence and the theme of *le hasard* are evident in *Éléazar.*[53]

On a meta-level, through the role of chance, Tournier problematizes the historical narrative of Moses, which is supposed to be edifying and exemplary (paradigmatic for those in exile). If the events of the narrative are in fact the work of chance and not a Divine patterning, then the Moses paradigm, upon which the protagonist builds his

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[52] The contrast between the adult and the child is not unique to this particular Tournier novel. In fact, Bouloumié (*Sagesse* 49) uncovers the same trend in both *La couleuvrine* and *Vendredi ou la Vie Sauvage.* For example, in *La couleuvrine*, Tournier explains: "L'impuissance des adultes à franchir l'abîme qui les sépare de l'enfant " (23).

[53] Bouloumié, who compares *Éléazar* to *La coulverine,* notes: "la problématique du hasard et de la raison qui veut l'exclure, centrale dans *La coulverine,* n'est donc pas étrangère à Éléazar" (*Sagesse* 53). In addition, there are numerous references to *le hasard* in the novella. For example "la famille se hasarda" (87); "Le hasard lui [José] avait permis de lancer les poursuivants sur une fausse piste" (103) ; and "[José] allait feindre de rencontrer les O'Braid par hasard (112).

identity, is called into question. History itself (and events of our lives and those on which we pattern our lives) is also called into question if action is only the result of *le hasard.* Worton comments that "the importance accorded to chance and coincidence deconstructs the meaning of history generally in Tournier's text." (*Tournier* 146)

The deconstruction of the historical narrative and the predominance of chance is particularly evident with the appearance of Cora, who presents a new, and possibly unwelcome, variation. Her character indirectly challenges the role of Moses as a leader since the roles of leader and follower are eventually swapped between Éléazar and Cora. In the Tournier version, the Biblical Moses is recast as a simple Irish-Protestant pastor directed by *le hasard* under the mask of Providence and it is Cora who is revealed as the 'true leader.'[54]

While it is Éléazar who decides to leave Ireland for the New World, it is Cora, not her father, who guides the family's decisions. Her prophetic insight and wisdom stand in contrast to Éléazar's haphazard reliance on scriptural texts for direction. For example, when the O'Braid family finally reaches the New World, it is Éléazar who must decide their final destination. He is fascinated by the name *California* and seeks direction: "Mais ébranlé tout de même par les merveilles qu'il entendait conter sur cette Californie, il eut recours à son procédé habituel : il ouvrit sa Bible au hasard pour trouver la lumière qu'il cherchait" (*ESB* 66). The narrator unveils the irony of Éléazar's understanding of Providence, which closely resembles coincidence: "Le

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[54] The presence of such a strong and well-developed female protagonist for Tournier is unusual. Maclean points out that, "Coralie, daughter to Éléazar, is more mature, rounded and interesting than other female characters in Tournier's works. She is assigned a voice by the author and plays a pivotal and prophetic role in the novel" (9).

hasard – ou plutôt la Providence – voulut qu'il tomba sur ces lignes de l'Exode" (*ESB* 66).

The distinction between Providence and *le hasard* therefore may not be so easily drawn, for what may seem to one person as a mere coincidence can also be interpreted as being endowed with significance, of being God's divine will. After reading the passage from the Exodus, Éléazar feels confirmed in "choosing" the direction of California and notes the linguistic and symbolic similarities between Canaan and California. For example, it is clear to him that both lands are fertile (*ESB* 67). Earlier in the *conte*, the narrator reflects on the practice of randomly consulting Biblical texts for direction, a practice which is often used to discern God's plans:

> Pour eux [les Protestants] la Bible restait le livre fondamental où toute la vérité était contenue. L'homme de foi ne devait jamais s'en départir. Toujours il devait tenir ouverte dans sa main gauche et la consulter au hasard—mais il n'y a pas de hasard pour Dieu—chaque fois qu'une question, un doute un problème surgissaient. La réponse se trouvait là. (*ESB* 20)

Here it appears that the narrator is attempting to reconcile this haphazard method of seeking wisdom and guidance by arguing that with God there is no coincidence. It seems quite ironic to argue for the notion of Providence with an example about randomly (by chance) chosing of a Biblical passage. The two seem contradictory.

In an interview, Tournier reveals his opinion on what he claims to be a Protestant approach to truth – one in which we can find answers to life's questions by simply opening the Bible, as does his protagonist Éléazar. Tournier comments:

> Non, c'est une idée de secte protestante. J'avoue que ce n'est pas ma façon de résoudre mes problèmes. Je ne suis pas de ceux qui ouvrent la Bible quand ils ont un problème avec leur femme, leur fils, leur jardinier ou leur peintre. Mais je passe mon temps à compulser la superbe bible

> en vingt volumes de mon grand-oncle, qui était curé-théologien-organiste-germaniste. (Payot 32-40)

Tournier argues that this "Protestant" approach for seeking truth and direction is too simplistic and he is clearly set against this method.

The narrator also inverts our notion of chance, by associating it with God. Tournier writes: " Comme écrit le mystique *Angelus Choiselus*, le hasard, c'est Dieu quand il voyage incognito " (*ESB* 58).

Early in the novella Éléazar's faith seems shallow and reliant on chance interpreted as God's direction; however, in the desert his faith is transformed and becomes more personal. By making an association between God and chance, the narrator shifts the traditional notion of chance to include a divine aspect. Éléazar's death culminates in an identification with the Moses figure and suggests the triumph of divine Providence.

Promised Land – Desert

The Promised Land – a land flowing with milk and honey – is associated with the blessing of God and is the ultimate goal, destination, and reward. In *Éléazar*, California is portrayed as the Promised Land. On the other hand the desert evokes images of the desolate, the abandoned – a land sparse in vegetation and other life. In the desert of the Wild West, corpses, outlaws, and serpents fill the terrain. The desert is often viewed as a cursed land. Tournier, however, plays an inversion of our notion of the Promised Land and of the Desert.

We are hesitant to agree with Tournier's association of the Promised Land with the profane. The Promised Land, rooted in the Genesis account (Gen 50: 24) and developed in the Exodus of the Hebrews out of Egypt (e.g. Exo 3:8; Deut 6:10-12), is

clearly a place of blessing and the promise of God. Tournier, however, suggests through *Éléazar* that God's desire was for his people to remain in the desert. While it is true that the Hebrew people were lured away from communion with God by the wealth and comfort of the Promised Land of Canaan, the desert had also not proven to be a place of greater intimacy with God for this generation of Israelites. In the desert, the Hebrew people complained to God and Moses, argued with each other, and lusted after the life and goods they left behind in Egypt.

Tournier establishes the desert as the locus of intimacy with God. In the desert God speaks to Moses in the burning bush, provides manna to eat, and tests Moses' faith. The interpretation of Moses' denial of entry into the Promised Land as an act of love is justifiable in this description of the desert. On a theological level we do not find Tournier to be unorthodox in claiming that it was out of love that Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Throughout the Old Testament, disobedience toward God always resulted in death, and it was only through an act of grace that Moses was able to stay alive. In fact, all of the other Israelites from his generation (except Joshua and Caleb) were struck down (Num 14:30, 39). Yet Tournier's sacralization of the desert as the site of intimacy with God is unsettling for those who see the desert as cursed. However, we would argue that it is not entirely without foundation within the Biblical narrative, since the desert is repeatedly depicted as a milieu of purification and closeness with God. For example, in the book of Hosea, intimacy with God is located in the desert (Hos 2:14; 13:5), and in the New Testament, Jesus seeks refuge in the desert to pray and be close to God (Mark 1:35; 6:32).

Éléazar provides a space to play the game of opposites and invites readers to reflect on pairs that are found in society. Tournier's *détournement* or inversion of many of these oppositions can prove troubling, however, to readers accustomed to viewing reality in a unitary way. While the study of binary oppositions proves to be intellectually stimulating, we should consider it only as a part of a larger reading. For those who enjoy the game of oppositions, however, this novella is saturated with examples.

Chapter V "Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are!"

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" shout small children playing hide-and-go-seek. As we continue to interpret *Éléazar* we too are longing for the "hider" to be revealed.

Playing Dress-up

It may be that "writer for children" is Tournier's first mask, there to disarm the wary reader against the density of *Éléazar.* The narrative's straightforward and lucid style can offer surface support, as does its vocabulary, itself simpler than *Le Roi des Aulnes, Les Météores* and *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique,* texts written for a more mature readership. However, despite Tournier's designation of *Éléazar* as a "children's story," the reader should not be deceived by his claim of apparent simplicity because even a first reading reveals a narrative both convoluted and profound. As Klettke observes, "[d]ans ce roman, la surface est si souple et si plate qu'elle arrive à tromper le lecteur ingénu sur sa véritable profondeur" (*L'art* 136 n. 16). With this seeming "children's story", Tournier provokes reflection on issues that may have been previously unquestioned. These include questions of exile, colonialism, the cultures of Native Americans, Catholic and Protestant views, and God's refusal to let Moses enter the Promised Land. [55]

By pairing the arrival in the New World with the conquest of Canaan in the Moses narrative, Tournier's *Éléazar* challenges readers to review underlying assumptions about the Biblical arrival in a postcolonial light. Concerns about

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[55] Elsewhere in Tournier we can detect a similar pattern of simplification and amplication. In *Vendredi* the reader may be led to reflect on slavery, colonialism, and the notion of *le bon sauvage*, while in *Les Rois Mages* (the children's version of *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar*), *négritude*, image, and wealth are possible topics that readers may entertain.

displacement, mistreatment, enslavement and slaughter of native peoples are legitimate and valid concerns, especially in the context of much of American colonization. The parallel to the entry of the Israelites into Canaan, however, though intriguing, is misguided. While the Israelites fought battles against remarkable odds and with few weapons, the conquest of the Americas by the Europeans was quite the opposite. They fought in large numbers, with excessive force and deception, and disregarded the disastrous effects of disease upon the Native Americans. As well, the land of Canaan, in part, belonged to Abraham's descendents (a parallel again missing in American colonialism), and the conquest of the Americas was not accompanied with a constant reminder of the equality of all peoples, as the Biblical text emphasizes (Deut 7:7). In Tournier's *Éléazar,* we can recognize the postcolonial voice of the conquered, while the author's narrative voice, in contrast, remains difficult to discern.

Many critics read Tournier's text in order to decipher the author's meaning or narrative voice. Since Tournier's narrative voice is often camouflaged, the challenge of the reader is to seek Tournier behind his various masks or disguises. In essence, Tournier invites the reader to a game of hide-and-go-seek, a game of the transparent and the veiled. The brilliance of this strategy allows him to present his views with a sense of innocent anonymity and distance.

The Mask of the Narrator

One of the techniques that Tournier uses to simplify his novels is the reduction from multiple narrative voices to a single narrative voice. Worton aptly remarks that this simplication not only renders his work more accessible to children but that it is"un stratagème textuel qui investit la narration de l'énigmatique simplicité prophétique du

discours parabolique" (*Écrire* 64). Cloonan also reflects on the shift toward a single, third person narrator in Tournier's quest to write for children. He remarks:

> The most striking aspect of *La Vie Sauvage* is, except for the goat, the absence of ambiguity. This is partly due to Tournier's use of third-person narration….the continuous third-person narration provides the young reader with a single, steady voice that not only describes events, but frequently explains their significance. For example, Tournier makes clear Robinson's hoarding food is a form of avarice. (*VS* 34) (Cloonan 35)

We would challenge Cloonan's contention that there is a lack of ambiguity in Tournier's works that are dedicated to a younger readership. While it is certain that the narrator helps to clarify a dominant reading of the text, the reliability of that single perspective is itself questionable, and other readings are nonetheless possible even for a young reader, even with a single narrative voice. The ambiguity of a multi-layered text reveals the genius and artful playfulness of the author.

Éléazar is recounted by a third-person omniscient narrator who provides commentary on the action, filters historical references, and explicates other intertextual and literary references. This facilitates the reading for a younger audience and gives the text a parable-like quality. While the style is sometimes accused of being 'sec' and too simplistic for an adult reader, it may appeal to younger readers, who perhaps do not possess the background knowledge required to understand the multiple layers of the text. As Platten comments:

> Hard–nosed, punchy narration—the action is rendered for the most part in the past historic tense—is leavened with concise explanations as to the allegorical significance of places and events featuring [sic] in the story. This latter tendency is a prerequisite, if Tournier is to make good his promise to a younger readership, for this novel marks the return of the 'big idea' (204).

The trend to clarify intertextual references may serve the pedagogical purpose to educate a changing readership, who may be considered "illiterate" with regard to the foundational myths and narratives of Western society.[56] It is also a blatant method of controlling reception and resultant interpretation of said intertexts.

The presence of such a strong narrator who assumes control over the material may be troubling for more mature readers (who might prefer to draw their own conclusions). Rivers' insight into the reception of Tournier's novels is useful for our study of *Éléazar*:

> The compulsion of Tournier's characters to perform literary self-analyses, in fact to interpret their own lives as if they were texts (and this at some length), can be both fascinating and frustrating for a would-be critic of the novels. This is not to say that it is impossible to comment or analyze them; it is rather to say that one of the most common tasks of literary analysis, that of reading textual signs as allusions either to other texts or to metaphysical concepts, has usually already been effected within the novel itself. Thus, the reader is forced to abandon his habitual practice of digging around the text and must instead rise above the text in order to be able to discern the play between narrative and its intratextual explication. To analyze Tournier's works, one is virtually obliged to metainterpretation: one's own interpretation of the novel's interpretation of itself. It is perhaps this convolution of the act of reading that renders Tournier's work abhorrent to some readers and fascinating to others, it is undeniably provocative. (117)

Rivers is accurate in coining the term meta-interpretation for reading *Éléazar* since nearly all of the intertextual references are explicated. Of course, the explicit nature of the references limits extratextual interpretation. For example, the narrator straightforwardly announces the parallelism between Moses and Éléazar and appears to leave no work for the reader. Tournier interprets for us the mildew on the potatoes

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[56] Tournier has commented on the growing erosion of myth in Western society. When French theorist Jean-François Lyotard coined the term *postmoderne* in the late 1970s, he noted one of the most poignant markers of post-modernity is a lack of meta-narratives or myths. These foundational narratives have receded from the general societal consciousness and the effect is particularly evident among children and adolescents.

and the cholera of the passengers aboard the ship to the New World as equivalent to the plagues of Egypt. Despite this trend, the mature or careful reader must take another step back in order to critically assess the interpretation being presented by the narrator and author – a process that could be either frustrating or pleasurable.

The genius of Tournier's use of the narrator is that it fictionalizes authorial opinions, allowing him as an author to make bold claims without responsibility. While Tournier may use the narrator as a disguise, we must also be wary of accepting the narrator's words as univocal statements of authorial "purpose." The game of disguise is challenging because one never knows if it is truly the authorial voice hiding behind the mask or not.

The Mask of the Mystic Angelus Choiselus

Tournier uses the figure of Angelus Choiselus as another way to mask the authorial voice. The narrator uses the form of an extratextual reference to the mystic ("Comme écrit le mystique *Angelus Choiselus*, le hasard, c'est Dieu quand il voyage incognito") to introduce and reinforce a central theme of the *conte,* that of *le hasard,* or chance (*ESB* 58).[57] The reference to Angelus Choiselus, however, unlike most of Tournier's uses of intertextuality, is entirely fictional and can be considered as a form of playful pseudo-intertextuality. Likely the name is a combination of "angel" (evoking close communion with God) and "Choisel" (the village where Tournier lives). It also evokes the name of the German mystic of the Counter-Reformation,

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[57] The mystic *Angelus Choisel* makes another appearance in the text. The narrator writes: "Chacun des quatre Irlandais prononça à tour de role l'exhortation magnifique du mystique Angelus Choisel: "*Entreprends sans peur et le cœur léger le voyage aventureux de la vie, de l'amour et de la mort. Et rassure-toi : si tu trébuches, tu ne tomberas jamais plus bas que la main de Dieu!*"(*ESB* 113).

Angelus Silesius, which is also a penname for the writer-priest Johann Scheffer (le berger évangélique).

The reader is more willing to trust or believe words from a mystic since s/he is someone who is spiritual and has a genuine connection with the transcendent. Klettke agrees that the voice of the mystic is likely the authorial narrative voice. In fact, she suggests that readers should pay particular attention to the figure of the sage since it may reveal the author's naarative voice, and one that is counter to the message of the text (*Préface* 13).

This game of disguise is one that fits well with the continuing game of hide-and-go-seek since, in both games, players are trying to uncover the author's narrative voice. While we contend that this search is challenging, Klettke is more cynical and suggest that the search is one without end. She writes: "[L]e vrai visage de l'auteur se dérobe dans une fuite sans fin" (*L'art* 140).

Musical Maze

Imagine for a moment that you are in a garden. At the center of the garden, there is a maze. You carefully enter with a group of friends. The excitement of discovery and the challenge of finding your way through penetrate your being. Then all of a sudden, you turn around and realize that you have lost everyone. You are alone at the heart of the maze. After overcoming the shock of distress you come to the profound realization that you can go anywhere you want.

Tournier's intertextual network can be likened to a musical maze with many different staves. The presence of voices from history, literature, different social strata, and religions extends the scope of *Éléazar* and helps to achieve "[Tournier's] fictional

goal [of constructing] a multi-layered narrative" (Roberts *Bricolage* 4). In many ways Tournier's intertextuality can be likened to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia,* which gathers together voices from different sources.[58] For readers, the process of sifting through the myriad voices can be likened to navigating through a musical maze.

Tournier gathers a chorus of religious and philosophical voices together through intertextual and narratival representation. He places the philosopher Pascal's quote, "Le nez de Cléopâtre, s'il eût été plus court, toute la face de la terre aurait changé" (*ESB* 40) alongside the legend of Saint Patrick (*ESB* 18–19) and the New Testament story of the Samaritan woman at the well (*ESB* 20–21). Religious voices are also heard through hymns and liturgy. For example, Tournier cites the Requiem, "Donnez lui Seigneur, le repos éternel et que la lumière sans fin brille pour son âme" (*ESB* 60) and a variety of Catholic and Protestant views are communicated through Esther, her parents, and Éléazar. Readers may ask why with such deliberate and concerted effort Tournier includes such a diversity of voices. Perhaps the author's narrative voice is not singular in the case of *Éléazar,* but made up of a many-voiced intertextuality. If this is true, then the search for the author's narrative voice would be virtually limitless. On the other hand, the myriad intertextual voices may not reflect the author's narrative voice but are interwoven to enrich the *conte*.

There are many other voices represented within the narrative through the characters Éléazar meets on his journey. The children provide a very significant voice especially since *Éléazar* was supposedly written primarily for children. However, the

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[58] See *The Dialogic Imagination* for the following definition of heteroglossia: "the collection of all the forms of social speech, or rhetorical modes, that people use in the course of their daily lives."

language of conquering pioneers, opportunity-seeking outlaws (cf. *Le Main Rouge,* a group of bandits), and Native Americans (cf. the Indian chief, the Serpent d'Airain) are all present yet may be more difficult for young readers to detect.

The elaborate referential infrastructure of Tournier's writing has been found to be "difficult" by some critics, who argue that, as a result, his works are inaccessible to a young audience. As Platten remarks:

> Baffled academics point to the thesaurus of cultural references embedded in his oeuvre, a cleverly constructed intertext existing on a scale unmatched in the fiction of any of the modern writers, which is designed to activate a knowledge and experience that a child reader could scarcely be expected to possess. (5)

While it is true that the child reader does not possess the ability to fully decode the rich intertextual layers in Tournier, his works that are specifically for a younger readership incorporate explanations of the intertext. In *Éléazar*, for example, Tournier repeatedly unravels intertextual references to facilitate the reading for children. For example, he clarifies the source of the word *Californie* through the narrative voice: "[C]'était en vérité le nom d'un pays de rêve, ainsi nommé par les Espagnols d'après un roman utopique situé dans une île imaginaire, *California"* (*ESB* 66). Moreover, Beckett asserts that child readers are especially interested in the intertextuality found in Tournier's texts, such as *Vendredi ou la Vie Sauvage.* She writes:

> Les enfants eux-mêmes s'intéressent passionnément à l'intertextualité dans l'œuvre de Tournier, à en juger d'après une des questions que les élèves lecteurs de *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* aiment poser à l'auteur pour essayer de le mettre en difficulté : 'Ça vous arrive souvent de recopier vos œuvres dans celles des autres?' " (*Romanciers* 126)

The presence of historical figures, other pieces of literature or famous events provide valuable entry points for reflection and learning for children. They can be

avenues to learn about a subject for the first time, to recall and review material from a previous encounter, or to reflect and then to negotiate meaning or even a course of action for themselves. We are reminded of the curious nature of children who enjoy seeking answers and discovering new knowledge. Nevertheless, Klettke warns:

> [D]ans l'écriture tourniérienne, les signes sont des pièges trompeurs qui séduisent par leurs promesses illusoires d'une révélation de sens.... Ils ne portent cependant que des traces, entraînant ainsi le lecteur dans un labyrinthe de mises en abyme intra – et intertextuelles. (*L'art* 133)

According to Klettke, the intertextual searches that are hinted at by Tournier deceptively lure readers to an infinitely inaccessible textual "meaning" or "sense."

Tournier develops a rich maze-like intertextuality. Navigating through the maze of intertextual voices can either be an interactive and contextualized learning experience or a frustrating search with an infinite number of permutations and no clear end. While these two possibilities can certainly coexist, we prefer the former.

The Ultimate Game

Tournier has remarked in the *Vent Paraclet* that myth enables humankind to rise above our animal nature. Myths are sacred fundamental stories that are known by all (*VP* 188). Cloonan comments that "to read a myth is to reread" (*Tournier* 4), a sentiment echoed by Tournier, who has said: "[M]es livres doivent être reconnus – relus – dès la première lecture" (*VP* 184).

Traditionally, myths provide hope and meaning and enlighten us as to humanity's purpose and future. At moments of crisis in history, leaders return to the founding myths to provide a sense of unity, order, and purpose. T.S Eliot writes that the mythological mode "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape

and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177). Readers should, however, be cautious in assuming this usage of myth by Tournier. Recall that myth for Tournier seeks not so much a coherent story that will bring order and understanding, but rather a creative use of myth that will disrupt commonly held beliefs (Cloonan, *Tournier* 5).

Tournier's ultimate game can be viewed as how he plays with the traditional use of myth through a trio of rereading, *réécriture,* and *détournement* of the original myth. His treatment of myth is emblematic of the *mode ironique* of postmodern writing that parodies meta-narratives and myths. The ways in which Tournier *plays* with myth reveal his originality and his creativity.

Rereading

By *rereading* myth, Tournier offers a new interpretation of a commonly held belief, assumption, myth or historical event. Vladimir Tumanov in his article, "Black and White: Michel Tournier, Anatole France and Genesis," notes that "rereading is something that Tournier does more than most authors" (312). One of the key modes of rereading is to focus the narrative on a specific part of the mythic source text (hypotext) or refocus it from a particular perspective. For example, one way that Tournier rereads the Moses story is by placing the emphasis on the elements of fire and water which deviates from the original plot line. Furthermore, he neglects major parts of the narrative such as the sin of Moses. This process of shifting the focus of the narrative may be disorienting for readers. Many conservatives, who do not believe that religious texts should be 'toyed' with, would take offence to Tournier's cavalier treatment of the Moses narrative. Nevertheless, when one changes the traditional mode

of reading, the question of meaning resurfaces which can be very fruitful and may be one of the eventual goals of Tournier's many-voiced intertext.

Réécriture

Some accuse the intertextual aspect of Tournier's work of lacking originality and creativity and cite this as one of his major shortcomings (Koster 12). Ironically, however, Tournier cherishes the creative aspect of his vocation (Luk 9). It is true that Tournier unabashedly borrows ideas, images, and stories from other sources and makes them his own. In fact, Tournier likens his writing process to that of a gathering magpie: "Je suis comme la pie voleuse. Je ramasse à droite et gauche tout ce qui me plaît, pour l'entasser dans mon nid" (de Rambures 163). The image of *bricolage* captures well Tournier's blend of authorial creativity and active engagement with source material. For Platten, the enterprise of *bricolage* is "a fascination with the relationship between the model and the copy, and, more precisely, with the potential activated by the copy to change the way in which the model is perceived" (6). Just as the authors of the New Testament take the Old Testament and recast the stories in the light of the advent of the Messiah Jesus (see Matt 1:22-23 and the virgin birth), Tournier's *Éléazar* transforms and challenges our common understanding of the Moses narrative.

This movement from the Moses narrative (model) to *Éléazar* (copy) is best explained with the terms *hypotext* and *hypertext*, from the critic Gérard Genette's discussion on transvalorisation, the process by which a myth (such as the Moses narrative) is placed in a new context. The hypertext is the source text or the original work (e.g. Moses narrative) and the hypotext is the contemporary reworking (e.g.

Éléazar). Genette explains that transvalorisation is "a shift in sociocultural and moral values from the hypotext to the hypertext" (418-424).

We agree with Sandra Beckett, Michael Worton, and others who argue that Tournier's insertion of familiar myths or references is an invitation to reread the hypotext or the source-text (Beckett, *Crosswriting* 46; Worton, *Intertextualité* 230). Worton explains that Tournier:

> Encourage le lecteur, non seulement à lire le texte de base (de départ) mais aussi à (re)lire et vérifier l'intertexte, à en découvrir le statut "agrammatical" dans le texte tourniérien, à reconnaître que toute référence extra-textuelle est nécessairement un commentaire (d'ailleurs métaphorique) et sur la texture et sur le fonctionnement du texte lu. (*Intertextualité* 230)

The hypertext is not, as used by other authors, a kind of commentary or interpretation of the hypotext, since Tournier places his primary emphasis on the novella itself (Beaude 423). He reworks the original in such a way that readers are drawn into the story within a new context. The reader then returns to the hypotext with a new perspective and is challenged to navigate these two texts and wrestle with the tension between the two. Thus in Tournier, the tension that exists between the hypotext and the hypertext is integral to the creation of meaning.

One illustration of this concept is found in Tournier's first novel, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (the hypotext), where the Robinson Crusoe story (the hypertext) is displaced by one hundred years, moving from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. In so doing, the narrative became more relevant for his contemporary readership. Furthermore, by altering the narrative's temporal aspect, his readers were perhaps enabled (or forced) to look more objectively at practices of the past, such as slavery and the European conquest of foreign lands.

Likewise, to understand *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar,* readers need to be familiar with the nativity story as well as the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. The tradition of the Magi who journey to find and worship the baby Jesus is introduced in the beginning of the gospel (2:1-12). The themes of reversal and inversion, which permeate the novel, are built upon the foundation of Jesus' seminal teaching, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-7:29), where we learn that in the kingdom of God the poor in spirit are blessed, the persecuted rejoice, and the meek inherit the earth.

In *Éléazar,* situating the Moses myth within the 1845 context of pre-potato-famine Ireland and the Atlantic crossing to the Promised Land of California is another apt example of the transvalorisation characteristic of *réécriture*.[59] Platten comments on this process:

> A chain of coincidences forges a distinctive union between Tournier's version of a 'western' and the [B]iblical exodus of the Jews. Effectively, Tournier transposes the Moses story to the nineteenth century when a new world again beckoned to the disadvantaged, persecuted peoples of the Old Continent. (204)

The movement from the Exodus to André Chouarqui's novel, *Moïse,* to Tournier's *Éléazar* represents an attempt to work out the relationship between the sacred and the profane, between intimacy with God and responsibility to the people, and between exile and the Promised Land in the context of the late nineteenth century.

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[59] The idea of *réécriture* or *l'écriture seconde* for Tournier was birthed long before he began writing novels. When he was a translator his view was that: "L'important, n'est-ce pas que les secondes soient meilleurs que les premiers?" (Tournier, *VP* 66). He explains that he had no difficulty altering translations by deleting some parts or adding others. Tournier believes that his second version of *Vendredi* is superior to the first. One wonders if Tournier is bold enough to claim that his *Vendredi* is superior to the original *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel DeFoe. By extension, is he suggesting that his reworking of the Moses narrative is superior to the original.

Tournier effectively re-inscribes the exodus motif in history. The Biblical story of the Exodus has served as a paradigm for many to understand the movement from bondage into freedom. Within their own texts, the Jewish people use the Exodus to interpret events, such as the Babylonian captivity. Even New Testament Jewish writers, such as Mark, use the Exodus paradigm of deliverance to communicate the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth (Watts, *New Exodus*). From American civil rights to Latin American liberation theology, the Exodus narrative has provided both meaning and hope.

The setting of the novella in the United States also entices the reader to reflect upon the conquest and foundation of the "New World." The insertion of the Indian chief, Serpent d'Airain, provides an entry point for reflection on the treatment of the Indians by the European as well as the nomadic lifestyle of the American Indians.

A transvalorisation occurs when the problems of Moses, a past hero, are applied to contemporary questions of man such as the search for identity, for home, for meaning, and for true intimacy with God. Through his use of *réécriture*, Tournier shifts the boundaries of our normal mode of thinking and we are led to question his works as well as the original.

Détourn(ier)ment

The French word *détournement* connotes a divergence or deviation from a commonly held interpretation. Roberts has even referred to it as high-jacking (2). This *détournement* or *détourn(ier)ment* is one of the key identifying marks of Tournier's work (which includes re-reading and *réécriture*). It is true that some find his retelling unsettling, disturbing, even sacrilegious. Pierre-Marie Beaude views Tournier's

treatment of myth as an inversion of the text, he writes: "[Tournier] soumet le texte à une herméneutique du détournement et de l'inversion" (421).

One of the key ways that Tournier alters a text is by creating a provocative ending to a familiar story. Readers who are acquainted with Tournier's style typically brace themselves for an ending that is shocking. For example, in *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar*, each of the wise men finds peace in the Christ-child; however, to the amazement of both *Gaspard* and the reader, Jesus appears as black. In *Éléazar*, even though the ending of the novella follows the Moses story closely; Tournier offers a radical re-interpretation of the significance of God's refusal to let Moses enter the Promised Land, which may surprise many readers.

Indeed, the *conte Éléazar*, while it shares many parallels with the Moses narrative, subverts both the message and form of the traditional version of the narrative. In fact, even the Biblical overtone to the novella is continually disrupted by the enigmatic character of Coralie and the introduction of the Serpent d'Airain. Furthermore, there is a constant tension between the authoritative Biblical surface narrative of Moses who encounters God directly and the haphazard narrative led by Éléazar who randomly consults his Bible for direction.

In terms of form, *Éléazar* may not function as a meaningful or morally guiding tale but rather as a story with a mythic structure containing no precise meaning. Klettke argues that "Dans *Éléazar,* les anciennes 'clés' ne passent plus dans les nouvelles 'serrures', si bien qu'elles sont sans valeur" (*Préface* 10). Tournier's manoeuvring of myth allows him to introduce profane content in the structure of the myth, thereby inverting the traditional usage of myth.

We would argue that it is not for mere amusement that Tournier distorts the Moses narrative (see section on *Rire Blanc*). Through the narrative strategies he uses, he is also able to challenge what he views as deeply rooted repressive structures of thinking and feeling. By twisting this foundational myth, readers are invited to rediscover it, to wrestle with Tournier's interpretation of it, and to negotiate their own meaning. The process of reflection and re-evaluation is one of the goals of Tournier's works. Tournier rewrites not in order to foment revolt but to enter into dialogue where he offers a reinterpretation of cultural history (Worton, *Intertextualité* 228).

Tournier's reworking of Moses' story in *Éléazar* challenges the myths or ideologies that shape our lives, our view of the world, and ultimately, our reality. Readers are thus confronted by a work that is simultaneously comforting because of its echoes of the past and surprising because its unpredictable changes to the myth.

"Catch Me If You Can"

In the game of hide-and-go-seek players must determine whether the intention or the goal of the game is winning or mere enjoyment. In our game of interpretation, we have sought and found many clues that point toward the possible narrative intentions or textual meanings, yet we are hesitant to declare that we have found all of the intentions or meanings that are hidden or embedded in the text. Does it follow that we have lost the game?

If we are reading for pleasure, extracting all of the hidden clues is perhaps not the goal of the game in the first place. By shifting the objective of the game from winning to pleasure, Tournier emphasises the importance of the process of playing of the game. He therefore, radically changes the traditional practice of reading a test to find precise

meaning. The process of reading and interpreting is parallel to the process of play. The hunt, therefore, has both intrinsic and pedagogical value.

Tournier functions as a facilitator of knowledge, through his use of play, and his emphasis on participation and discovery. As readers spend time in the text, pondering the lives of the characters, and exploring new ideas, they gain knowledge of themselves and of the world. This is particularly true of young readers. This process could be understood as pedagogy of play. Nevertheless, the educational benefits of Tournier's writing is not limited to a young readership. Tournier's reworking of myths and symbols incites both child and adult readers to re-think and re-evaluate their own position vis-à-vis text and world. Furthermore, Tournier's style appeals to adults who still retain the qualities of the child-like mind – those who are open to and not afraid of 'playing' with new or unfamiliar ideas, those who are courageous enough to explore different ways of interpreting reality and who are not constrained, like some literary critics, within a specific interpretive framework.

Engaging readers in the game of interpretation is paramount since for Tournier meaning lies in the interplay between reader, author, and text. In the *Vol du Vampire*, Tournier insists that "un livre n'a pas un auteur, mais un nombre indéfini d'auteurs" (10-11). Klettke also recognises the role of the reader as a co-creator: "Dans le 'cosmos' créé par l'auteur jouant le rôle de 'Dieu créateur', le lecteur a la liberté, dans le cadre des 'règles' établies par le texte, de prendre part à un jeu lui permettant d'imiter à son tour le 'Dieu de création' " (*L'art* 135). Play and reading are therefore complementary creative acts.

Conclusion

After exploring the various games Tournier plays in *Éléazar*, we return to the questions of interpretation and meaning in the novella. There is enough evidence to demonstrate that *Éléazar* is not simply a resolution to the puzzling question of why Moses did not enter the Promised Land. The initiatory hunt, the elemental coupling of fire and water and the use of the ludic seem to be the most significant interpretive frameworks and the most helpful to the reader as well. Nevertheless, our searches have overall revealed a text that is so permeated with ambiguity as to elude interpretation.

Perhaps Tournier's exaltation of the roles of reader and writer can lead us to view *Éléazar* as a parable for the author-reader relationship or in other words, a meta-text that explains the process of interpretation.

It is established that Tournier takes great pleasure in attacking the practice of literary criticism. By confusing the relationship between the creator (author), the text, and the receiver (reader), Tournier provokes critics who claim to be 'super-readers' of the text and whom he finds overly rigid in their reading and interpretive strategies.

Like the protagonist Éléazar, readers and critics embark on an interpretive journey. They enter the novella either with certain expectations or in a state of innocence. They then pursue a reading path or a variety of paths but are consistently confronted by a text that is full of the twists and turns, traps and holes we have detailed above. Each of these may reveal glimpses of the author's narrative voice but more importantly also reveal the reader, since it is the reader who actively chooses which paths to follow or which markers to privilege. Tournier's use of the ludic, therefore, helps free the text from the confines of interpretation that rests solely on denotative

sense. While Tournier deconstructs traditional reading and interpretive approaches, we would argue that his writing is constructive rather than destructive or nihilistic in nature. More specifically, Tournier composes his works with the reader in mind and seeks to actively engage the reader. The intellectual activity undertaken in the reading game of hide-and-go-seek reveals the writer and reader as co-creators.[60] Readers who are able to play this game are liberated from their old reading practice and are welcomed to a new reality marked by artistic freedom.

[60] Such an interpretation is consistent with Tournier's self-definition of author as creator.

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